OTHER HANDS

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Editorial: Almost on Schedual

What can I say? The title says it all. With this issue, I hope to get Other Hands back on a consistent, quarterly publication schedule (disrupted over the past year by my new duties as Assistant Series Editor for MERP). There have been a few changes in our production staff since our last double issue, but I think that the new situation will be very conducive to getting future issues out on time. All for better, since I've been accumulating a small mountain of submissions for the pages of this journal that are just waiting to see print.

Anyway, in addition to all our normal features I've decided the time was ripe to publish a rather lengthy piece I prepared some time ago: a "live" transcript of an on-line Kin-strife campaign I ran about a year ago. The original character stats have all been included for those GMs who might be in need of some colorful NPCs in their own game. I always find Campaign summaries of this sort to be very enjoyable reading— and valuable, since they often suggest ideas for how the scenarios of a published module might be adapted and actualized in a real game.

Next issue (July) we will be back with another wide variety of articles and adventures. And now, on with the show...

Chris Seeman
April 30, 1997

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NEXT ISSUE

"The Knight Wives"

COMMUNICATIONS

Björn Asle Taranger:

I normally start reading OH from the beginning, and on page two of last issue I found a very refreshing and rather puzzling letter written by a French "school of Elven studies" who obviously take their "Tolkien" very seriously, and who also doesn't care much for role playing (in general). That was impression anyway.

The letter was interesting, and I must say that I can share some of their concerns regarding the "authenticity" of ICE's version of Middle-earth. However, I found it hard to take the article all too seriously when characterizes Pete Fenlon's maps as "ridiculous." Such a statement should be backed up by some arguments, in my opinion.

I liked the fact that the letter was printed. This brings credence to the claim that OH is independent of ICE. I hope the letter may be the start of serious debate which may be carried out both here and in OH.

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Robert Carignan:

I'd like to append my comments to the ones already voiced on the latest issue (#15/16) of Other Hands. First, I'd like to give Editor Chris Seeman credit for printing the letter from "The Association of Friends of Tolkien in France" (hereafter referred to as the "Association"). As Chris states in his editorial on the front page, Other Hands' purpose is "to provide an open forum that celebrates a diversity of viewpoints on Tolkien's world as it relates to role playing." The Association's view isn't against role playing in Tolkien's world, just ICE's approach to it. Kudos to Chris for publishing an anti-MERP letter in a definitely pro-MERP journal.

As for the Association's view, at first I was shocked, then downright resentful of it. However, as I re-read the letter over the week's time, I began to sift through what they were saying and understand it a little. In their letter, they write: "This 'crowning glory' of role playing games is a highly dangerous dish for novice Tolkienists (and other amateurs) who want to learn more about Tolkien and his world!" I couldn't agree more with this statement. The primary gripe of the Association seems to be that they fear people unfamiliar with Tolkien's works will use the published material by ICE as a surrogate for the actual corpus. They also take great exception to the fact that ICE invents portions of Middle-earth in order to fill in the blank spots on maps and flesh out areas to role play in.

Does the Association think that we don't know this? If so, they have a false impression of us. Do any of you believe that ICE is a true and accurate resource for Tolkien's works? I don't! They are a game company that has a license from the Tolkien Estate to develop and publish their version of Middle-earth; one that we buy into by purchasing their product and molding it to fit our conceptions and role playing needs. By our own agreement it is an exemplary product line that we feel represents the flavor of Middle-earth,but I would never think to substitute it for reading Tolkien himself.

The Association's letter is reactionary, fueled by an imprecise conception on what ICE's Middle-earth Role Playing is and who we are as players of that milieu. In response to their final statement, "please for your game-settings, do rely on your own imaginations than on ICE modules," I say that I rely heavily on the former with a nice dose of the latter because I understand the difference.

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Phil Hendry:

Regarding the letter from the Association of Friends of Tolkien in France, just saying Pete Fenlon's maps are "ridiculous" is in itself ridiculous.

Without any evidence or arguments being offered we must surely conclude that this statement is simply an expression of personal taste on the part of the author.

In my opinion, Pete's maps are fine. I like them a lot and use them all the time in my games. In terms of accuracy (i.e. fitting in with the journeys described in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings) they work about as well as any others I've seen. What other criteria could one apply to maps of Tolkien's world? The level of detail is about right — enough detail to aid the description of the adventures in a particular module, whilst still leaving enough "blank" areas around to be used for "home-grown" adventures. There are aspects of ICE's treat-

FINE PRINT

Other Hands is an international gaming journal devoted to fantasy role-playing set in J.R.R. Tolkien's secondary world of Middle-earth. It is a quarterly, nonprofit publication welcoming submissions dealing with any aspect of gaming in the context of Tolkien's -world: scenario ideas, rule suggestions, gaming product reviews, gamemastering aids, bibliographic resources, essays on Middle-earth, and whatever else our readership would like to see in print. In a word. Other Hands aims to be the definitive Tolkien-related gaming journal for a worldwide role-playing communitiy. Within the pages of Other Hands, the interested gamer may publish materials with reference to any game mechanics he or she chooses (including Rolemaster and Middle-earth Roleplaying). Such gaming material may deal with any time period of Tolkien's world, and need not be bound to what has already seen pring in Iron Crown's modules. Other Hands provides this freedom because it is a nonprofit publication. Subscription rates are as follows: inside the USA — 1 issue $3/4 issues $12; outside the USA — airmail, 1 issue $3.50/4 issues $18. Payment should be made to Chris Seeman: PO Box 1213 Novato, CA 94948, USA No Eurochecks, please!

Submissions are welcome in any from (preferably legible), but we prefer if you can to send a file. We use Word for Windows. If there is any question as to the readibility of you file, please save it in ASCII or text-only format and include a hard copy. All submissions must be sent to Chris Seeman: PO Box 1213, Novato, CA 94948 [USA]. Please write me or call if you have any difficulties. My phone number is [415] 892-9066. Please note also that I may be reached on-line at: **chris1224@aol.com**

ment of Middle-earth with which I am less happy though. I'm not 100% happy with the magic system. I'm not sure that it models the magic of the books very well. I'm also less than happy with the amount of treasure handed out in the modules. I routinely divide the money and gems by at least ten, chop out most of the magic items, and reduce the power of those left.

MERP (and its big brother RM) are pretty much "traditional" FRPGs, catering to the "traditional" gamer, who wants loads of fancy spells to cast and to get very rich, very quickly. No bad thing in itself, as it makes for a fun game, but in my humble opinion it doesn't fit J.R.R. Tolkien's vision. There's no reason why a game fitting the books better shouldn't be fun either — the fun would just be a bit different, which would also be no bad thing.

I wonder why ICE took the route they did? Perhaps because they thought a "traditional" FRPG with loads of magic and treasure would sell better than an "accurate," low treasure, low magic game? Perhaps to fit in with RM?

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Jasna Martinovic:

The letter that criticized the ICE books in OH 15/16 was an interesting point of view, because it shows that there are people who are rather conservative in their approach to the works of Tolkien (as well as very ignorant about the aspects of role playing in Middle-earth). I didn't agree with their critiques about ICE being 'unloyal' to the true spirit of Tolkien, but they pointed out one thing that was also very puzzling to me: the one female Nazgûl. Even this example of 'disloyalty' to Tolkien isn't enough to justify their critique, because they are creating a dogma from Tolkien's books and aren't allowing people to be creative by adding their own elements to the world that Tolkien had created. So far, I haven't noticed any major discrepancies between Tolkien and the books by the authors that work for ICE, and until someone offers better material for role playing in Middle-earth, I will continue to appreciate and buy ICE's books.

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Chris Seeman:

As several (or, at any rate, four) readers have been moved to respond to the open letter from the School of Elven Studies which appeared in last issue's Communications column, I too have felt compelled to offer some kind of rejoinder. I'm not certain whether its author had in mind any of my own contributions to the MERP series in his censures, but since I have made a contribution to some of the recent modules (The Kin-strife, Southern Gondor) and have, more recently, assumed much of the editorial responsibility for the content and quality of the line, I think it only fitting that I should answer some of his criticisms.

I recognize from the outset that his letter was intended as a succinct cautionary message, and not as a detailed exploration of the strengths/weaknesses of the MERP series. The point it seeks to make is perfectly legitimate: to alert people to the fact that the representation of Tolkien's world in MERP products does not necessarily reflect what Tolkien himself wrote. However, in making that point I believe that the author has also made some potentially misleading statements which I hope to correct. There are many aspects of past MERP products (some major, others less so) with which I share the author's criticisms (see, for example, my reviews of Angmar and Mirkwood in OH 12). However, I would take exception to the hyperbolic tone he adopts. It is a gross exaggeration to assert that the entire MERP line contains "not a single pertinent analysis, no notes worthy of interest, not the least trace of well considered interpretation." The only way to answer this kind of assertion is with specific examples, and these I will take from my own work or from work which I edited (not because I think these are necessarily superior to other examples, but because I can claim direct responsibility for their publication).

Take Southern Gondor, for instance. I think the section describing the values and ideals of the Gondorian nobility is a rather cogent summary of the characteristics which Tolkien used to distinguish the Faithful Númenóreans from the King's Men. Not only does it attempt to profile these virtues, it also attempts to show the various ways in which they interact with one another to form a distinctive cultural mentality.

As for "notes worthy of interest," I would recommend a glance at Martin Baker's highly valuable and laboriously researched concordance of the various calendrical systems observed in the South-kingdom. Another example of what I would call a carefully considered interpretation is the history of Dol Amroth that appears in that module. Anyone who is even remotely aware of the morass of conflicting and unresolved traditions in Tolkien concerning this site and its occupants will appreciate the kind of interpretive effort demanded for achieving a coherent synthesis for a mid-Third Age game setting. My reconstruction of that history may well be at variance with the views of others, but it would simply be fallacious to impute that the version appearing in the module was unresearched, ill-considered or insensitive to the larger themes of Tolkien's mythology.

The author's principal criticism appears to be that "ICE transforms what Tolkien has actually written in his books, and pretends to do otherwise (italics mine)." While the first part of this statement is demonstrably true—as applied both to outright errors and to valid elaborations of Tolkien's world — the second is not. Every MERP module states clearly at the very beginning and in no uncertain terms: "ICE does not intend [the MERP line] to be the sole or proper view....Remember that the ultimate sources of information are the works of Professor J.R.R. Tolkien." So however justified the author may be in criticizing the failings of the series to live up to his own high standards, it cannot accurately be claimed that ICE has involved itself in a conscious deception to mislead "novice tolkienists (and other amateurs) who want to learn more about Tolkien and his world." I fully concur with the author that the point of role playing is to have fun and that gamers should rely on their own imagination in exploring Tolkien's world. However, in caricaturing ICE as some monolithic entity bent on ruining Tolkien's mythology for crass commercial motives he fails to recognize that the vast majority of MERP products are conceived and written not by ICE, but by free-lance writers who are using their imagination to explore Middle-earth. "Marketability" is hardly what motivates these individuals; rather, it is a genuine love of Tolkien's world.

If ICE can be faulted for anything, it is surely for the reverse of what the author implies; the need is rather for a more informed and consistent editorial control than ICE has heretofore exercised over the content of the series. No single person's knowledge of Tolkien's world is perfect or complete, and I am no exception to that rule. I believe that the most effective way for improving the quality of MERP in this regard is to cultivate a global network of specialists devoted to all aspects of Tolkien's work relevant to role playing (history, linguistics, etc.) who can function as "consultants" in the development of new products. Other Hands has helped to foster that goal over the past four years, and the vastly enhanced communication possibilities of the Internet has also played its part. This effort is already beginning to bear fruit, and I anticipate that it will reap still more positive results in the course of this year.

One final remark: I was rather shocked at the author's benign judgment of the MERP rule system (in contrast to his wholesale rejection of the modules). In my view, the rules are the most problematic and fundamentally "un-Tolkienian" aspect of the series. In my own gaming experience, it is game mechanics (or, rather, their overall orientation and implied style of play) that often prove to be a central factor in determining whether or not a game will successfully evoke the feel of a given literary world. To the extent that the MERP rules are the step-child of the Rolemaster system, they reflect its cosmology rather than that of Tolkien (though cf. OH 13:16ff). The MERP magic system is merely the most glaring example of this gulf. Happily, ICE is seriously considering creating a new rule system (or significantly restructuring the existing one) which will reflect the distinctive themes of Tolkien's mythos. All that remains is to locate potential writers who are sufficiently competent in both Middle-earth and game design...

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BIBLIOGRAPHY ADDENDUM

Nancy Martsch "Review of Arnor: The People" p. 7, Beyond Bree (April 1997)

Chris Seeman "La Religione nella Terra di Mezzo" Terra di Mezzo 4:10-15 (1996) [translated from OH 2]

Enrico Clementel "L'occhio di Krynein" Terra di Mezzo 4:73-76 (1996)

Carl Hostetter "Notices for Arnor: The Land and OH 15/16" Vinyar Tengwar 38:31, 36-37 (1997)

Comision de Rol de la STE Smial de Edhellond (Valencia, Spain)

Some of you may have noticed that no Frontlines column appeared in our last issue. (An oversight on my part.) Consequently, there's quite a bit of news to relate. Both volumes of the new Arnor module are now in the stores, and the eagerly anticipated Northern Waste module should be out within another month, if not earlier. The Northern Waste will be inaugurating some significant new developments in the MERP series as a whole.

The first of these developments concerns maps: Pete Fenlon will no longer be rendering the color terrain maps we have all grown to know and love as one of the hallmarks of MERP. New artists (who have proved their mettle with work on the MECCG) will be preparing all future terrain maps in conjunction with the style of Jo Hartvig's north-western Middle-earth map (which was first featured on the area cards for ME:TW). The good news is that the first fruits of their labor (to appear in The Northern Waste) are quite impressive, and ICE has intentions of extending these maps to cover the entire continent of Endor at a consistent scale of 1" = 40 miles. In addition, a new north-western Middle-earth poster map (a blown-up version of Jo Hartvig's card map) is soon to be released.

The second new feature to be introduced with The Northern Waste is the inclusion of original MECCG expansion material with each new MERP module. This will take the form of card game scenarios set in the region (or related to the theme) covered by the module, accompanied by new cards. It is ICE's hope that such "crossover" material will extend interest in MERP to players of the card game and vice versa. If sales figures indicate a positive reception to this innovation, it could lead to some very pleasant consequences for those of us who are interested primarily in MERP. For example, it might lead ICE to commission new color card-artwork specifically based on characters, sites and artifacts described in the modules, which would certainly enhance their visual component. So keep your fingers crossed! Another general MERP development (which, however, will not be represented by The Northern Waste) has been a decision to reduce the maximum page count for the modules so as to make them more affordable. The goal will be to keep all future MERP releases at $20.00 or less (though the inclusion of color maps will still push this figure up somewhat). This means a maximum published page limit of 144, which will still provide ample space for making Middle-earth the most richly detailed of fantasy role playing universes.

As far as the 1997 publication schedule goes, there will be a brief hiatus following the release of The Northern Waste. The two manuscripts currently contending for the next publication slot (August through September) are Hands of the Healer (a profession sourcebook on healers, healing herbs and healing magic) and The Inland Sea (which will be combining into a single volume what would have appeared separately as the Dorwinion and Rhûn realm modules). It is also hoped that Near Harad and The Grey Havens will be ready for late 1997 release dates.

New projects which have recently received approval from ICE include two revised/expanded citadel modules: Rivendell and Lórien. Meanwhile, work actively continues on Paths of the Dead, Minas Morgul, and the Southern Middle-earth Gazetteer. Contract negotiations are very likely to progress on the Middle-earth Language Guide proposal noticed in the last Frontlines column, and ICE has now begun to reconsider an already existing proposal for an Eastern Middle-earth Gazetteer. Finally, a new MERP/MECCG crossover product, Elrond's House, has just been approved (details on this will be forthcoming in a future issue), as well as the final chapters in the adventure book series accompanying the Lord of the Rings Adventure Game system.

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Digital Hands

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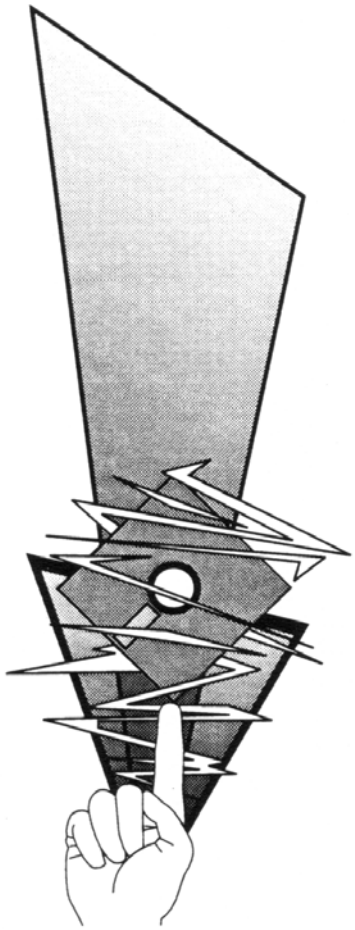
Moria, Angband and Tolkien's influence on hacker culture



In 1983, a game called The Dungeons of Moria (Moria for short) was first released. Its primary influences were Rogue, D&D and Rolemaster. It differs from Rogue by being much larger and more advanced. It was created by Robert Alan Koeneke on a DEC VAX. Koeneke used to sit up all night coding the game and a friend of his, Debra Jean Lee, would sit by his side and test what he did (and when this had been going on for about three years, the two got married). The game was soon ported to Unix and both versions spread rapidly on computer networks all over the world. Today, versions also exist for most popular personal computers, such as PC and Macintosh.

Like Rogue, Moria is a D&D-style game where most of the action involves killing off monsters to gain experience, gold and treasure. The player chooses a race and a profession and then develops a character with the usual abilities and skills.

The goal of the game is to penetrate the depths of Moria and kill the Balrog deep down in the lower levels. While this may at first seem very "Tolkienish," most races, monsters and artifacts in the game are not. Another thing which clearly sets it apart from Tolkien's world is the "town level" which is found above the dungeons. There, Hobbits, Half-elves and others are running shops for adventurers in need of equipment.

Moria, along with a few other games, such as Adventure, Star Trek and Larn became an important part of the hacker culture during the eighties. To have defeated the Balrog without cheating was (and is, to some extent) almost a requirement for a true hacker.

There are several reasons why Moria became popular with hackers. One is that role playing seems to be a frequent activity among hackers, another that the game is very complex, but perhaps the most important reason is that the source code (in C, which is one of the most hacker-friendly programming languages) was freely available. This led to that many people developed the original, which became ever more complex, and also to new, unofficial, versions of the game.

One such version was The Pits of Angband (commonly referred to as Angband). It was first released in 1989 and for a time it and Moria were developed in parallel. Angband, however, was even more advanced than Moria from the outset and it quickly became so much more popular that development of Moria almost ceased completely.

Angband is not only more advanced than its predecessor. Its authors also took a step back to its roots, or as the Version page of some versions somewhat exaggeratingly expresses it, they "wanted to keep, or even strengthen, Moria's firm grounding in Tolkien lore."

Angband is still very close to its origins, and someone who has played Rogue will quickly feel at home with the user interface (which is, it should be pointed out, far from intuitive) and the "graphics," based on ASCII characters. The main difference is that Angband naturally is much more complex. There are hundreds of different monsters and objects, a detailed magic system and literally endless labyrinths to explore. Even a devoted and experienced player will usually have to struggle for months before he can reach the goal of the game: to defeat Morgoth himself.

Another very prominent characteristic of the game is that it is highly addictive. Once a player has overcome the initial difficulties with the user interface and has seen his first few heroes bite the dust, he or she will be very reluctant to leave the computer, even to get some food and sleep. Today, Angband is further developed by Ben Harrison, who is aided by several other people in testing, debugging and porting the game. New versions are regularly released and the number of devoted fans is as high as was ever that of Moria. Angband is also one of the few games which, week after week, constantly manage to stay on the Internet PC Games Charts.

Any serious computer gamer should have tried these games, and even though their connection to Tolkien's works is not as strong as some people would like to think, I highly recommend the readers of "Digital Hands" to give them a try. And if you plan to become a hacker, a thorough knowledge of them is a must.

Moria on the Internet:

Unofficial Moria page: http://www.ecst.csuchico.edu/~beej/moria/

Official distribution site: ftp://ftp.cis.ksu.edu/pub/Games/Moria/

Angband on the Internet:

Ben Harrison's Angband page: http://www.voicenet.com/~benh/Angband/

Official distribution site: ftp://export.andrew.cmu.edu/angband/

Let There Be Strife!

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Ever since the publication of The Kin-Strife two years ago, I have been receiving a steady stream of inquiries from gamers (mostly GMs) who have purchased the module and want to make use of it in their own campaigns. One of the most frequently asked questions is: How do YOU run YOUR Kin-strife campaign? My games tend to be rather involved— complex plots, intense player character interaction, and a "spider's web" style of running, in which the actions of a group of PCs in one corner of Gondor will have ramifications for PCs elsewhere in the campaign. So as I attempted to answer people's questions, it became increasingly apparent to me that I could only adequately present this material in one fell swoop, here in the pages of Other Hands.

First, some background. I began running this campaign while the module was still under construction in late 1994 (in part, for the purpose of play-testing my own contributions to the project). Way back in 1981, I had begun running Middle-earth games set just prior to the Kin-strife. Through this series of chronologically linked campaigns, I managed to take my players all the way through the end of Castamir's reign and into the beginning of the Corsair period. Since some of this material was to see publication in the module, I decided to start over (more or less from scratch). For this reason, I chose to set the adventures in T.A. 1438, the first full year of the Usurper's reign (rather than in TA. 1441, as in the published module).

Since then, I have managed to bring my players through an entire game year of Castamir's rule, and have run most of the scenarios provided in the module. This campaign summary is presented in the following manner. First, I give a "big picture" overview of the events of TA. 1438-1439. Next, I give profiles for each of the main PCs that participated in them. These "close-ups" contain full (RuneQuest) stats along with short epitomes of each character by the person who played it. Finally, I present edited transcripts of some key scenes that were conducted between the PCs on-line. Together, all of these windows should give the reader a flavor of what is but one possible trajectory for adventuring in the time of Gondor's civil war.

THE ANNALS

OF THE KIN-STRIFE (III 1438-1439)

Shortly following his triumphant return from exile in T.A. 1447, the victorious King Eldacar decreed that a history of the South-kingdom's years of oppression under the Usurper should be compiled by Coratar, now the restored Prince-president of Minas Anor and one of the few elder statesmen to survive the vicissitudes of Castamir's ten-year reign of terror. Unbeknownst to the general populace, Coratar's apparent senility had in truth been a cunningly contrived ruse with which to mask Eldacar's greatest spy and clandestine supporter.

Although excluded from political power under the Usurper's regime, Coratar nevertheless heard and saw much of what passed behind the scenes — especially during the Council of Gondor, which continued to be held annually at Minas Anor throughout Castamir's reign. Coratar, moreover, was closely tied to various loyalists and other dissident groups or individuals, though few of these ever penetrated Coratar's harmless visage. In addition, Coratar was able to gain access to many secret archives and dispatches of the Cor Aran (Castamir's secret police). Finally, after long months of cross-examining his many sources and filling in the gaps of his knowledge with educated guesses, Coratar undertook to compile a narrative of what are perhaps Gondor's darkest years. Here follows Coratar's account of the tumultuous events that overshadowed the first year of the Usurper's troubled reign...

On the sixth day of Hithui, in the bloody autumn of 1437, the Council of Gondor named Castamir, grand-nephew of Rómendacil II, as its twenty-second king; and, thereafter, Castamir was found to possess all the marks of divine grace that belong by right to the heirs of Meneldil, son of Anárion, descendant of Elros Tar-Minyatur, whose scions the Valar appointed to rule the Dúnedain until the World's End.

The new king remained in Minas Anor until the end of the year, reordering the realm in accordance with his will; but on the first day of 1438, Castamir removed himself to Pelargir, refusing to heal the damage he had wrought upon Osgiliath until such time as the Council should accede to his wish that Pelargir be officially recognized as the royal seat of the South-kingdom. The Usurper did little to recommend the Council's concurrence with this petition; for immediately upon his arrival in the great haven, Castamir commanded Caramir his cousin to seize and occupy the Hall of the Faithful, that most sacred precinct of southern Gondor, in order that it might be made a citadel of perfidy. For this was to be the stronghold for the Cor Aran, and no greater scourge has visited itself upon our great cities than that nest of vipers —or "crows," as folk were wont to say.

The principal event (or culmination) of the Usurper's early years was an unforeseen war, which the king waged against his erstwhile mercenary allies: the Southron Confederacy of Near Harad. It was this conflict which was responsible for the untimely diminishment of Castamir's war-host, and so for your own swift return from exile, my lord Eldacar. The tale of the words and deeds which brought about so unexpected a reversal is a tangled skein indeed, and its outcome dearly bought with the noblest blood in Gondor. Yet I will not spare your majesty the sorrows of that dark road, but shall report them as best I am able.

Near the middle of the year, in the month of Cerveth, it came to the attention of Lorin, royal seer and warden of the Anor-stone, that a company of four ghostly shapes had emerged from the northern entrance of

the Paths of the Dead. Living men they were, yet cloaked and hooded to conceal their faces. Through the vision of the palantír, Lórin shadowed their steps, until their destination had become apparent. The seer departed Minas Anor, riding North to intercept the strange travelers at the outflow of the Onodló, where that river's tangled fens met the broad flow of Anduin.

There the seer confronted the shadow-company, discovering their names and their purpose. They were led by a man of Calenardhon named Telcontar, who with his companions had been sent unjustly to the prison mines of Imlad Angren on false charges of treason by the Usurper's men. Telcontar spoke of their escape from the mines, which had brought him and his comrades inadvertently into the Paths of the Dead. There they had been taken before Morthec the Doomed. Yet though the terror of the Oathbreakers was scarcely to be endured by the living, nonetheless the Dead did them no harm; instead, Ygana the Prophetess revealed to her undead lord that Fate had brought these men before his throne, and that by Telcontar's hand the Dead might work to preserve the Line of Elendil, by whose scions alone they might fulfill their oath.

For Ygana perceived that Elendil's heirs were now threatened by a man who, if he chose the path of evil, would soon hold the power to destroy them. "This man," quoth the undead seeress, "shall be made known to you by a sign: an ancient blade he shall claim for his own, a sword whose sister was given to my lord Morthec's grandfather, who swore the Oath to Isildur. It is said that no living man may take the Paths of the Dead; but if you and your companions swear that you shall seek out the one who is destined to claim the sword, and to destroy him if he fails to renounce the doom that beckons him, you alone among the living we shall suffer to pass this place unhindered." Telcontar and his companions took that oath, and received in token of their task weaponry and raiment of the Dead.

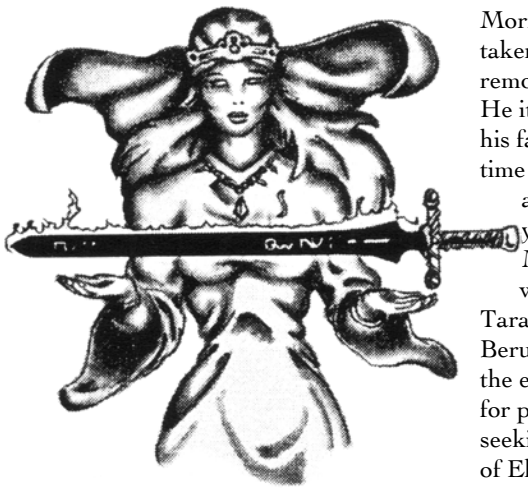
With the aid of Lorin's knowledge and lore, Telcontar soon discovered that the twin of Morthec's sword, long in the possession of the princes of Mornan, now hung above the ruined throneroom of the Dome of Stars in Osgiliath. A guard was set about that place by Telcontar and his companions, lest they be absent when the sword was claimed. Lórin disclosed the matter to the king, who was then still dwelling in Minas Anor, following the Council of Gondor. Castamir had been wounded by an assassination attempt upon his entry into the city on Loëndë, and decided to stay his return to Pelargir until it was healed.

After learning from the seer that the Dead had prophesied a threat to his rule (as he interpreted the oracle), the king sought a secret meeting with the bearer of these tidings. Telcontar's family and fellow townsmen had been imprisoned in Osgiliath as part of the design of Castamir's Calenardhon officers to seize their land and possessions, and Telcontar promised to aid in the uncovering of Ygana's prophecy on the condition that the Usurper restore his people to their own and to punish those responsible for the injustice. Castamir, eager to win the favor of the Messenger of the Dead, agreed. For this reason, the king resolved to remain in Minas Anor until the claimant of the sword should be revealed. He would not depart for Pelargir until spring of the coming year.

With the knowledge of hindsight, much that -was then clouded in uncertainty may now come to light; for verily the man of whom Ygana had spoken was none other than Orodreth, son of Prince Maeglin of Mornan, who since the fall of Osgiliath had taken the name of Neithan, tormented with remorse for his flirtation with the rebels. He it was who had abandoned the sword of his fathers in the ruined capital; but at this time he dwelt in the Ethir, serving the king as Captain of the River Guard. Though yet unknown to him, the princes of Mornan, to whom Neithan was heir, were sprung from the union of King Tarannon Falastur and his sorceress-queen Beruthiel—the fruit of some dark plot by the enemies of the Faithful, as it now seems; for powerful forces were then at work, seeking one who would supplant the Line of Elendil and who, in the chaos of the civil war, might come to rule the Westlands under their hidden sway. Such, I believe, was the design of Zimrakhil, the ambassador of the Southron Confederacy, who (as we have afterwards learned) knew of Neithan's ancestry, and sought to win his allegiance. The Valar be thanked that events turned out otherwise than Zimrakhil had hoped.

At this time, Zimrakhil had already begun to court Neithan's trust indirectly through a woman named Iriel, a sorceress among the Ethir-folk. Now Iriel had a brother, Colfen, who was a lieutenant of Neithan's and close in his counsel, but it was long before either revealed to Neithan anything of Zimrakhil; indeed, it appears that Iriel and her brother were allies of Zimrakhil by unhappy necessity, and that their true motivations were at variance with his. I deem it better, though, not to delve too deeply into the webs of deceit that have plagued the ranks of our enemies, and shall continue with the tale.

It appears that Zimrakhil had set his designs in motion, for in Girithron oft that year, both of Neithan's parents were murdered by an assassin, thus confronting Neithan with the imperative to assume his father's title and rank (and, doubtless, to claim the sword). When his parents were slain, Neithan was in Umbar with Colfen, seeking out mercenaries to aid him in cleansing the Ethir of pirates. Zimrakhil also was in Umbar at that time and, just prior to Neithan's arrival, an incident took place that brought the two men to a meeting.



News had reached Pelargir that the Nenduhir, a great merchant vessel, had returned to Umbar from its seven-year voyage into the Far South, and Castamir desired to send a representative to the haven to gain news of Haradwaith and the lands beyond. To this end, the Usurper sent Daeron, the trusted Squire of Linhir, to question Kunbeshu, the Nenduhir's captain. While in Umbar, just before Neithan's arrival, Daeron was stabbed and almost slain by an Ethir renegade who falsely claimed to have acted on Neithan's orders. When it was learned that Neithan had arrived in the haven, he was brought before the governor and interrogated. The ruse was, however, short-lived; for Iriel suddenly came to Umbar at that time as well, bearing to Neithan tidings of the assassination of the Prince of Mornan, and defending his innocence before the governor.

Within a short time, Iriel succeeded in turning suspicion onto Zimrakhil. A search was conducted for the Southron ambassador, in which Neithan, Iriel, Kunbeshu, and a few others participated. At the last, Zimrakhil was found, outside the walls of the haven. Seeking a parley, the crafty Southron revealed to Neithan his heritage, and compelled Iriel to admit to her part in the attempt to sway his loyalty. In addition, Zimrakhil revealed to those assembled the identity of the assassin of Neithan's parents (though omitting the fact that he himself was aligned with the power responsible for ordering the assassination).

The assassin was Draktar, a member of a deadly order known as the Slayers; and the only way he could be stopped, the sorcerer claimed, was by the recovery of an ancient artifact of power: the Karma of Aldarion. For though this assassin was unconquerable through force of arms, he said, Draktar was, in fact, under a spell of delusion that forced him to kill. This spell could only be banished by the willpower of one wielding the powers of Aldarion's Karma. This long-lost Númenórean artifact, Zimrakhil explained, could only be found with the aid of the Karajaz, a golden disk which contained a map that showed the way to the Karma's last resting place. The Karajaz, however, had been divided into three pieces, each of which was hidden in different locations. Iriel, he charged, was already in possession of one of these pieces, and sought to withhold it from Neithan unless he should do her bidding.

What exactly this was is unknown to me, your majesty; at any rate, the disclosure had a powerful effect upon both Iriel and Neithan. For, at Zimrakhil's insistence, Neithan swore an oath upon Iriel's sorcerous amulet that he would find all three fragments of the Karajaz, and that he would bring them before Zimrakhil before seeking out the Karma. According to some of my sources, this oath had been sworn under duress; but, for good or evil, it was taken nonetheless, and we may yet see it bear fruit...

When Daeron the Squire had recovered from his wound, he joined Neithan, Iriel, and many others at the funeral for Neithan's parents on the isle of Tolfalas (which was held on Yestarë of 1439). Iriel, however, was busy with her sorcery it seems; for by some strange chance Draktar the assassin had come to Tolfalas (perhaps to kill again). But Iriel's sorcery prevented this, and led to his capture. The details of this spell have eluded my sources, but I am told that it involved the death of an innocent girl, and that this deed estranged Neithan from Iriel and her brother. Whatever took place on that isle, it was decided that Draktar (who denied all knowledge of the assassinations, claiming to be a humble Southron merchant) should be brought before the king in Minas Anor for trial.

Lórin the royal seer had also been at the funeral, though he had departed prior to Draktar's discovery and capture. Lórin was making haste for Osgiliath, and his young cousin Tirazôr went with him. Distrustful of Neithan's intentions, the seer sought to take the sword into his custody, and to bring it to Minas Anor, so that there would be no reachery on Neithan's part. Tirazôr, however, was secretly in league with Neithan; and perceiving that Lórin would not willingly grant the blade to Neithan, Tirazôr seized the sword himself and took to flight. Telcontar and his companions, deeming this the sign that Ygana had foretold, pursued him with Lorin.

Tirazôr managed to evade his pursuers, though all the garrison of Osgiliath was mustered to prevent his escape. Mounting his horse, the young thief fled along the western bank of the Great River, until at last he intercepted Neithan's ship, bound for Minas Anor. Climbing aboard, he presented the sword to Neithan. At Daeron's counsel, however, Neithan refused the blade, realizing that, were he to claim it just yet, he would become complicit with Tirazôr's reckless actions. Instead, Neithan commanded Tirazôr to hold the sword in his keeping, and to make for Umbar by land. Dejected and desperate, Tirazôr obeyed, and swam to the eastern bank of the river, vanishing into Harithilien.

It was a grave decision, but a timely one; for soon after Tirazôr's departure, Lórin himself appeared on the west bank, flanked by the Messengers of the Dead, hot with their pursuit. Neithan permitted Lórin to board his vessel, but denied that Tirazôr had been there. Unwilling to waste precious time interrogating the matter further, Lórin and the hunters took their leave, and crossed the river to continue their pursuit, while Neithan sailed to Minas Anor.

A special convocation of the Council of Gondor was called forth by the king at Minas Anor to debate the fate of Mornan and to judge the suspected assassin. I was not present at the private interviews Castamir held with Neithan or Draktar, but the reversals that followed were astounding. Neithan was named Steward of Mornan and guardian of his young sister, Estel (whom Prince Adrazôr of Belfalas, the executor of Neithan's father's will, had selected as an heir). As for Draktar (or "Khoradûr," as he called himself), Neithan, Daeron, and Kunbeshu all ended up DEFENDING his innocence before the king! This (not surprisingly) led to his acquittal.

This sudden change of Neithan's disposition towards the murderer of his parents remains an inscrutable mystery to me. I have only one possible clue to rely upon: on their journey upriver from Tolfalas to Minas Anor, Neithan, Daeron, Draktar, and Kunbeshu had stopped briefly in Pelargir for an audience with Queen Mûrabêth. It was later pointed out to me that Draktar/Khoradûr had once been a guest of the queen's, and that many in the Council who supported his acquittal were her supporters. Both Daeron and Neithan were, of course, closely aligned with her at that time. So, it seems possible that Mûrabêth was ultimately behind the deed; but her conceivable motives continue to baffle me. Some tales will never be told aright, I fear.

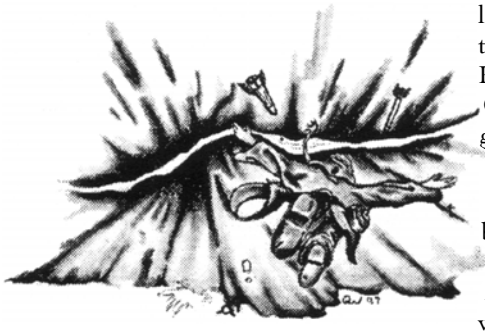
Alas, for matters went just as ill for Lórin and Telcontar in their pursuit of Tirazôr and the sword. Tirazôr's trail brought them over the Poros and into Harondor; but Tirazôr was himself captured by other hunters (whether by chance or design). Narwain was the month during which the Southron tribes of Harondor and of Amrûn gathered before a sacred mountain at the foot of the Ephel Dúath, near to the point at which that range turned eastward into Near Harad. Here Tirazôr was taken with the sword, and here both fell into the hands of Zimrakhil, whose custom it was to preside over this gathering.

With Neithan's ties to Iriel severed, Zimrakhil needed a new incentive to draw the Steward of Mornan to his allegiance. To this end, Zimrakhil placed the sword in the keeping of the Mountain of Power (as the Southrons call it), whence none save Neithan might claim it. As for the wretched Tirazôr, Zimrakhil saw fit to torment his mind with his fell sorceries. When Lórin and the hunters arrived in the Southron camp, they demanded the return of the sword, but Zimrakhil asserted that the blade was Neithan's by right, and that any other who dared to defile the mountain sanctuary would feel the wrath of the Power that lay within (a Maia, Lórin guessed). Tirazôr was surrendered to them, and the hunters returned to Pelargir, foiled by Zimrakhil's machinations.

But Tirazôr's ordeal was not yet ended, for Lórin questioned him sternly, looking into his mind and unlocking the secrets that lay hid within. Tirazôr had in the past been Iriel's pupil, and knew much of her intentions (albeit in a somewhat distorted form). Despite the lies Zimrakhil had spoken to him, the seer perceived the sorcerer's design to raise up Neithan as a pretender to the throne of Gondor, but mistakenly — though understandably, given Tirazôr's actions — believed Neithan to be complicit with Zimrakhil's plot. With this new knowledge in hand, Lórin and Telcontar brought Tirazôr before the king in Pelargir.

Supported by the testimony of the Messenger of the Dead, Castamir was persuaded by the seer's warnings that an insurrection, inspired by the Southron Confederacy, was in the making. Without hesitation the Usurper authorized Lórin to make use of the Cor Aran in Neithan's apprehension. Tirazôr was imprisoned in the Hall of the Faithful, while Lórin and Telcontar made for the Mornan, prepared for a violent confrontation with Neithan. On the way, however, new evils came to light: the assassin had struck again.

Draktar, it seems, was continuing to carry out his brutal assassination orders, this time against the Prince of Belfalas. First the prince's son, and then Adrazôr himself, fell before the Slayer's deadly poisoned darts. In a death-defying escape, Draktar leapt off of the thousand foot cliffs of Dol Amroth into the waters of the bay below. His body was never recovered, but few had any doubt the dread assassin had survived. Following the death of Adrazôr, Galadriel, the Lady of Tirith Aear, wove a



mist about the heights of Dol Amroth that no enemy should pass, and Aradan, the dead prince's eldest surviving son, fortified Ost-en-Ernil against any further incursions. Belfalas was paralyzed with fear. But Draktar would not return to that place. Instead, he turned his face eastward, seeking out Tirazôr in Harondor (unaware of his capture and imprisonment at Pelargir), drawing him ever nearer to the Mountain of Power, and Zimrakhil.

Meanwhile, Lórin and Telcontar had reached Mornan, where they soon discovered Neithan's rejection of Zimrakhil's plots. Indeed, Neithan desired to join Lórin in his mission to destroy the sorcerer; Telcontar and his companions, having been convinced that Neithan would not stray onto evil ways to the hurt of the kingly line, regarded their oath to Morthec fulfilled, and returned to their kinsfolk in the north. Neithan returned to Pelargir with Lorin, and received the king's pardon. From there, the two men set out for the Mountain of Power.

Following the Council of Gondor at which Draktar was acquitted and Neithan given the stewardship of Mornan, Daeron resolved to seek out Zimrakhil, suspecting him to be behind the assassination attempts. Umbar was his destination, since that was where the Southron ambassador spent most of his diplomatic life; but on the way to Linhir, Daeron held another private audience with the queen in Pelargir. There he revealed to her all he had learned about the Karma and the Karajaz, and counseled her to join in the search for these artifacts before Zimrakhil or his minions found them.

Mûrabêth entrusted him with this task, promising to Daeron her sister Telerien's hand in marriage should he win for her the legendary Karma of Aldarion. (Doubtless the queen felt that the recovery of the Karma would so ennoble Pelargir that the Council of Gondor would be swayed to grant the haven official status as the royal seat.)

Bere departing for Umbar with Kunbeshu on the Nenduhir, Daeron held a secret meeting in the safety of Linhir. Apart from him and Kunbeshu, Neithan and Iriel were also present at this gathering. Though their meeting was cool, the two eventually reached some kind of truce for the sake of locating the three pieces of the Karajaz and keeping them out of Zimrakhil's hands. It was the last time they would part as allies.

Daeron now pressed on to Umbar, where he gained the blessing of Mûrabêth's father, Telemnar the governor, for his betrothal to Telerien. Zimrakhil was not in Umbar at that time, but Daeron was constrained for many days from pursuing him to Harondor due to the arrival of Castaher, the king's son, bearing orders for Daeron's arrest on charges of treason (Neithan's innocence had not yet been established before the king, and Daeron's close contact with him made him an accessory to the supposed

insurrection.) Telemnar used his influence to delay the order long enough for Daeron to be cleared of the charge. Soon, however, the key to the Karma — the Karajaz—would come to Daeron without ever having to leave Umbar.

War was now preparing in Harondor. Elendin, the Usurper's uncle and Governor of Harondor, was mustering troops at Athrad Poros and Amon Eithel, purposing to contain the Southron host now gathered at the Mountain. Zimrakhil, meanwhile, had withdrawn to Amrûn, and began rallying the kings of Near Harad to the defense of their brethren in Harondor. At this time, Neithan and Lórin came to the Mountain of Power. Shortly before then, Iriel had penetrated the fastness of that mountain with a few others who were also searching for the missing fragments of the Karajaz (one of which, as Iriel rightly guessed, lay at the roots of the Mountain).

Iriel's search brought her first to Amrûn, where her paths crossed with Dirk, a caravan guard who was in possession of a map showing the location of one of the three pieces of the Karajaz. Together they wrested the fragment before Zimrakhil's minions could obtain it. At that point, while still on the eastern borders of Harondor, Dirk and Iriel were unexpectedly joined in their search by a youth named Darion. In origin a street urchin from Minas Anor, by a twist of fate, Darion had come into possession of the Karajaz piece that Iriel thought she had hidden away safely (though he said nothing of this to her).

Darion was bound for the Mountain of Power when he encountered Iriel and Dirk, but not for the sake of gaining the third piece of the Karajaz — he had a personal enemy whom he believed he would find at the Mountain. This was Tarain, the Straight Man of Pelargir, who had been "muscling in" on Darion's territory in Minas Anor. The Straight Man had obtained the piece of the Karajaz that Darion now secretly held, having procured it as a favor for Zimrakhil's spies in Pelargir. But, perceiving the value of this thing, Tarain had murdered the spies and set out for the Mountain, leaving the fragment behind in a safe hiding place, intending to bargain for it with Zimrakhil. Tarain, however, was unaware that Darion had subsequently discovered the thing's hiding place and was now in possession of it—the Straight Man had no bargaining chip.

Together the three seekers — Iriel, Dirk, and Darion — entered the Mountain by secret ways from Nurn, and penetrated its defenses to the vault of Zimrakhil's third of the Karajaz. They were, however, discovered, and were separated in flight. Iriel entrusted two the two fragments they had won to Dirk, and bade him escape to Umbar (where she knew Daeron to be). She herself chose to remain in the Mountain, believing that the third piece was still there. And she was right, for Darion still secretly held it; but Darion was captured and taken before Zimrakhil.

There Darion discovered that the Straight Man was dead — executed for daring to bargain with the likes of Zimrakhil. By a miracle of fast talk, however, Darion managed to save his own skin; in fact, the sorcerer pondered how the youth might be used as a means of bringing Neithan to the Mountain, where he might be coerced into the allegiance of Darkness. Darion, who had some knowledge of Neithan, suggested that they create a ruse, leading Neithan to believe that his young sister Estel (heiress in absentia to Mornan) had been captured by Zimrakhil and was being held prisoner in the Mountain. Zimrakhil concurred with this plan and sent Darion to carry it out; but he himself was forced to withdraw soon thereafter, because of the unexpected buildup of Gondorian troops.

Darion intercepted Neithan and Lórin in route to the Mountain, and told them the lie about Estel, promising to lead them inside by secret ways. In the process of falling into the trap, however, Neithan came upon the sword that Zimrakhil had deposited there, at last claiming it for his own. Discovering the ruse about Estel, the three attempted to escape, but were unwittingly led into the presence of the Power of the Mountain. On the way they encountered Iriel, who attempted to dissuade them, knowing the peril that lay beyond. But Lorin, believing her to be their enemy, throttled the sorceress by the throat and ended her life before Neithan or Darion were able to prevent him. Neithan then took up Iriel's magical amulet, upon which he had sworn his oath to Zimrakhil, and continued the escape.

The Power that ruled the Mountain was unknown to the fugitives, but the seer perceived that she was no Maia, but an undead being of great might. She repeated the words that Zimrakhil her servant had spoken to Neithan long ago in Umbar: that, if he would receive her aid, he would have the power and the right to overthrow the Usurper, and to bring order to the Realms-in-Exile under his rule. But Neithan, wary of the enemy's lies, resisted. Then the Dark Lady fell to threats, saying that she would destroy his companions unless he surrendered to his destiny. Then Neithan was tempted to draw upon the power of Iriel's amulet to drive back this undead thing, but Lórin urged him not to, saying that if he succumbed to the desire to use the amulet, he would become enslaved to its power. Yet none of them was able to break free from the Dark Lady's aura of terror.

At the last, Lórin put forth all his will power, and broke the spell that held his companions, enabling them to flee for their lives. But the escape was dearly bought, for the Dark Lady turned all of her malice upon the seer, and broke his body with the wrath of her gaze. He was never seen in the realm of the living again. By his sacrifice, he saved both Neithan and the South-kingdom from an evil far greater than Castamir.

Escaping the Mountain, Darion and Neithan parted ways. In payment for the loss of their companion, Darion surrendered to Neithan the third piece of the Karajaz which he had secretly carried with him for so many leagues. Then Neithan bade him farewell, and set off for Umbar, where Daeron was awaiting him. Darion told Neithan that he was bound for Minas Anor, but when Neithan had left, Darion returned to the Mountain for an audience with the Dark Lady. Acknowledging the young man's cunning and daring, the Dark Lady made Darion her ally, sending him back to Gondor as her spy.

Meanwhile, Neithan, Dirk, and Daeron had all met in Umbar, bringing together at last the three pieces of the Karajaz, which formed a map that showed the location of Aldarion's Karma in the depths of Far Harad. But though they were now in a position to win the Karma, Neithan and Daeron were at odds as to what should be done with it. Daeron openly admitted his intention to bestow it upon Queen Mûrabêth, and so to gain Telerien's hand in marriage; Neithan, remorseful for the loss of Lorin, demanded that it be returned to its rightful wielder: Aradan, heir to the Prince of Belfalas. In the end, they agreed to defray the matter until the Karma was actually in their possession. With the aid of Kunbeshu, the three companions sailed south to Bozisha-Dar, and inland from there to the Mirror of Fire, beneath which lay Fuinur's Well, the last resting place of Aldarion's Karma.

Once having gained the artifact, they returned north. There were none to hinder them, for Zimrakhil and all his servants were wholly occupied with the prospect of war with Castamir.

Draktar — The Slayer

I was born on a winter solstice, when the moon was fullest in the evening sky. My father was proud when my mother, a priestess of Ladnoca the Moon Goddess bore myself and my twin sister Shadia into thid world. From that moment on I have lived my life for a single mystical purpose, unknown even to my family. As a strong and quick child, I wad trained by my nomadic Sederi brethren as a warrior, while my mother taught me rituals and rites of the Desert Moon. Yet dreams taunted my sleep with violence, and powerful visions made my spirit quake. Finally, I left my home and made a secret pilgrimage to Ny Chennacatt, the Dragon's Maw, to learn the ways of the Slayers. My training was as quick as it was lethal, and shortly after I began to control my dreams, and better understood the rituals of death taught me in my youth. Now my combined knowledge of blade, poison, and ritual magic had made me whole. I know that I am destined, by mystical fate, to walk the earth in search of a silver-haired woman, whose death fills my dreams. I will impersonate many people by name and dagger, using loyalties and friendships to practice my art of poison. I will find her, for that is my purpose: the Gift of Death.

—played by Tim Innes

STR 17 **CON:** 15 **SIZ:** 16 **INT:** 14 **POW:** 10 **DEX:** 16 **APP:** 8

Skills

Agility — Climb 79, Dodge 64, Jump 45, Ride Camel 49, Ride Fell Beast 36, Row 18, Swim 27, Throw 60

Communication — Persuade 30, Sing 8, Speak Adunaic 44, Speak Apysaic 74, Speak Westron 54

Knowledge — Animal Lore 9, Evaluate 30, First Aid 44, Human Lore 23, Mineral Lore 10, Plant Lore 25, Poison Lore 79, Shiphandling 4, Weaponsmithing 24, World Lore 9, Read/Write Adunaic 32, Read/Write Apysaic 54, Read/Write Westron 29

Magic — Healing 66, Night Vision 69, Pass without Trace 42, Phantom Armor 37, Shadow Stalk 41, Spider Climb 38, Summon Fell Beast 61

Manipulation — Conceal 60, Devise 48, Play Flute 30, Sleight 40

Perception — Listen 57, Scan 65, Search 40, Track 12

Stealth — Hide 76, Sneak 76

Weapon	SR	Attack	Damage	Parry	AP
Chain Whip	5	43	1D6 (+1D6)	33	10
Grapple	6	71	1D6 (+1D6)	54	—
Heavy Cestus	6	61	1D3+2 (+1D6)	51	3
Knife	6	47	1D4+2 (+1D6)	19	4
Scimitar	5	70	1D6+2 (+lD6)	60	12

Missile	ROF	Attack	Damage	Range	AP
Blowgun	1/MR	49	1D3	30/30	4
Thrown Knife	1/SR	57	1D4 (+1D3)	20/20	4

	AP
Hit Points: 15	
Head: 5	9
L Arm: 4	4
RArm: 4	4
Chest: 6	9
Abdomen: 5	4
L Leg: 5	4
R Leg: 5	4

Daeron — Squire of Linhir

With all the back-stabbing, power-grabbing, and division in this realm it would be foolidh to seek power and status without the aid of one such as myself, who has given counsel to the likes of Neithan and even Queen Mûrabêth. Some have accused me of duplicity, but I am loyal to those whom I believe to be good and true. Through such ad these, I have gained purpose, power, allies, help, and resources. Perhaps one day, through my hard work, I shall attain noble rank or — dare I day — royalty?

—played by Dave Jurgens

STR 16 **CON:** 16 **SIZ:** 16 **INT:** 17 **POW:** 14 **DEX:** 13 **APP:** 14

Skills

Agility — Climb 33, Dodge 43, Jump 33, Ride Horse 65, Row 58, Swim 46, Throw 33

Communication — Persuade 72, Sing 41, Speak Adunaic 43, Speak Quenya 22 Speak Sindarin 35 Speak Westron 74

Knowledge — Animal Lore 37, Evaluate 59, First Aid 37, Human Lore 77, Mineral Lore 37, Plant Lore 37, Shiphandling 62, World Lore 56, Read/ Write Adunaic 52, Read/Write Quenya 32, Read/Write Sindarin 41, Read/Write Westron 74, Manipulation — Conceal 43, Devise 43, Sleight 43

Perception — Listen 52, Scan 52, Search 52, Track 52

Stealth — Hide 43, Sneak 43

Weapon	SR	Attack	Damage	Parry	AP
Eket	6	68	1D6+1 (+1D4)	61	10
Knife	7	67	1D4+2 (+1D4)	43	6
Lance	4	66	1D10+1 (+1D4)	—	10
Shield	7	48	1D4 (+1D4)	65	10
Missile	**ROF**	**Attack**	**Damage**	**Range**	**AP**
Steel Bow	1/SR	71	1D8+2	120/225	12
Hunting Spear	1/SR	72			
1D8 (+1D2)	20/50	8			

Hit Points: 16 AP
Head: 6 —
L Arm: 5 —
R Arm:5 —
Chest: 8 —
Abdomen: 6 —
L Leg: 6 —
R Leg: 6 —

Dirk—Dúnadan Mercenary

As a soldier who witnessed the treachery of the Kinstrife, I lost faith and found all men to be inherently self-motivated and evil Thus, I retired from service in the Gondorian army and began working as a mercenary, assigning myself to the highest bidder. Although cautious, I will never back down from a challenge; and when Iriel approached me about her quest, my skepticism almost kept me from what would amount to my brightest moment. The final capture of the Karma with Neithan and Daeron helped me to regain my faith in Men.

—played by Curran Engel

STR: 16 **CON:** 18 **SIZ:** 14 **INT:** 17 **POW:** 14 **DEX:** 17 **APP:** 13

Skills

Agility — Climb 57, Dodge 76, Jump 56, Ride Horse **66,** Row 36, Swim 56, Throw 56

Communication — Persuade 41, Sing 41, Speak Adunaic 31, Speak Haruze 41, Speak Sindarin 31, Speak Varadja 31, Speak Westron 41

Knowledge—Animal Lore 57, Evaluate A7, First Aid 67, Human Lore 67, Mineral Lore 47, Plant Lore 57, World Lore 67, Read/Write Adunaic 27, Read/ Write Sindarin 27, Read/Write Westron 37

Manipulation — Conceal 55, Devise 55, Sleight 55

Perception — Listen 54, Scan 54, Search 54, Track 64

Stealth-Hide 49, Sneak 49

Weapon	SR	Attack	Damage	Parry	AP
Broadsword	6	85	1D8 (+1D4)	76	10
Knife	7	75	1D4+2 (+1D4)	66	6
Spear	5	75	1D10+1 (+1D4)	66	10
Missile	**ROF**	**Attack**	**Damage**	**Range**	**AP**
Steel Bow	1/SR	75	1D8+2	120/225	12

Hit Points: 16 AP
Head: 6 7
L Arm: 5 7
RArm: 5 7
Chest: 8 7
Abdomen: 6 7
L Leg: 6 7
R Leg: 6 7

Neithan—Steward of Mornan

Orodreth was once my true name; but Orodreth is dead, murdered by treachery, slain by pride, cursed by fate. Only I, Neithan—a fitting namesake!—remain, the unquiet shade of a man. On my head lies the evilest bloodguilt of this Kin-strife; Túrin himself could lay claim to no greater misdeed. But what has been done cannot now be amended. Rage —only rage is left to fill the emptiness of my soul; yet I shall NOT be conquered by it. Doom pursues me like a ravening beast, yet I shall NOT become its slave. I do not seek redemption. But there SHALL be a reckoning, and I shall be there when it happens.

—played by Greg Bailey

STR: 14 **CON:** 14 **SIZ:** 14 **INT:** 13 **POW:** 17 **DEX:** 13 **APP:** 16

Skills

Agility — Climb 51, Dodge *46*, Jump 36, Ride Horse 41, Row 31, Swim 31, Throw 36

Communication — Persuade 60, Sing 35, Speak Adunaic 45, Speak Sakalai 30, Speak Sindarin 40, Speak Westron 60

Knowledge—Animal Lore 23, First Aid 37, Human Lore 53, Plant Lore 18, Shiphandling 38, World Lore 45, Read/ Write Adunaic 33, Read/Write Sindarin 33, Read/ Write Westron 43

Manipulation — Conceal 53, Devise 28, Sleight 18

Perception — Listen 64, Scan 64, Search 64, Track 64

Stealth—Hide 50, Sneak 50

Weapon	SR	Attack	Damage	Parry	AP
Long Sword	*7*	*73*	1D10+1(+1D4)	66	14
Knife	8	58	1D4+2 (+1D4)	51	6
Shield	*7*	68	1D6 (+1D4)	71	10
Missile	**ROF**	**Attack**	**Damage**	**Range**	**AP**
Steel Bow	1/SR	64	1D8+2	120/225	12

Hit Points: 14	AP
Head: 5	8
L Arm: 4	8
R Arm: 4	8
Chest: 6	8
Abdomen: 5	8
L Leg: 5	8
R Leg: 5	8

Darion — Gang Leader

I grew up in the shadows of Minas Anor, struggling to survive in those streets that you good, wholesome folk pretend don't exist. It was in those streets that I organized the gang that would become known as the Brotherhood of the Hand, and there I began my campaign to seize control of the city's underworld. Although publicly honored by the Usurper for capturing that grave-robber Goromil it is well known that I hold no love for Castamir, nor for his Côr Aran (with which I often find myself at odds). The Côr Aran's constant meddling in my affairs and their attempted assassination of the Lady Mórdulin has forced me to move against them. But knowing that to defeat them here in Minas Anor is only a temporary success, my eyes have now turned towards their home base: the Hall of the Faithful in Pelargir. Soon Caramir also will feel the touch of the Hand!

—played by Josh Curtis

STR 13 **CON:** 16 **SIZ:** 9 **INT:** 15 **POW:** 8 **DEX:** 17 **APP:** 10

Skills

Agility — Climb 65, Dodge 58, Jump 61, Ride Horse 42, Row 15, Swim 45, Throw 60

Communication — Persuade 59, Sing 9, Speak Westron 35

Knowledge—Animal Lore 15, Assassination 69, Evaluate 35, Find Weakness 68, First Aid 35, Human Lore 50, Mineral Lore 10, Plant Lore 31, World Lore 18, Read/ Write Westron *7*

Manipulation — Conceal 59, Devise 67, Sleight 70

Perception — Listen 58, Scan 63, Search 62, Track 12

Stealth-Hide 80, Sneak 82

Weapon	SR	Attack	Damage	Parry	AP
Knife (R)	8	*75*	1D4+2	*46*	10
Knife (L)	8	*64*	1D4+2	*70*	10
Missile	**ROF**	**Attack**	**Damage**	**Range**	**AP**
Thrown Knife	1/SR	*67*	1D4	20/20	10

Hit Points: 13	AP
Head: 5	—
L Arm: 4	—
R Arm: 4	—
Chest: 6	—
Abdomen: 5	—
L Leg: 5	—
R Leg: 5	—

Telcontar — Messenger of the Dead

I was raised as a shepherd upon the great plains of Calenardhon; Fate decreed otherwise, delivering me into the hands of a treacherous rogue. I was imprisoned in the mines of Imlad Angren, but escaped with the aid of loyal friends and found myself in the Paths of the Dead. It was there that I met Morthec the Doomed and was given the Gwaedhel-blade in exchange for my oath to protect the line of the kings. I fulfilled that promise, and now wander the lands in search of my lost brother, who fled to join Eldacar in the North.

—played by Ray Higgins

STR: 11 **CON:** 13 **SIZ:** 14 **INT:** 17 **POW:** 16 **DEX:** 14 **APP:** 16

Weapon	SR	Attack	Damage	Parry	AP
Gwaedhel	7	77	1D10+1 (+1D4)	73	20
Knife	8	59	1D4+2 (+1D4)	31	6
Missile	**ROF**	**Attack**	**Damage**	**Range**	**AP**
Long Bow	1/SR	74	1D8+1	90/275	8
Thrown Knife	1/SR	42	1D4 (+1D2)	20/20	6

Hit Points: 14	AP
Head: 5	8
L Arm: 4	3
R Arm: 4	3
Chest: 6	7
Abdomen: 5	7
L Leg: 5	3
R Leg: 5	3

Skills

Agility—Climb 31, Dodge 48, Jump 31, Ride Horse 47, Row 31, Swim 31, Throw 31

Communication — Persuade 83, Sing 43, Speak Adunaic 23, Speak Sindarin 32, Speak Westron 43

Knowledge—Animal Lore 57, Evaluate 57, First Aid 37, Human Lore 67, Mineral Lore 17, Plant Lore 37, World Lore 57, Read/Write Adunaic 27, Read/ Write Sindarin 31, Read/Write Westron 37

Manipulation — Conceal 36, Devise 36, Sleight 36

Perception—Listen 52, Scan 54, Search 52, Track 52

Stealth-Hide 24, Sneak 24

Lórin — Royal Seer

As Royal Seer to Castamir, I have had many duties and powers. The palantír of Minas Anor is mine to gaze into, and it is mine to reveal what I see to my lord Castamir. Not all that is seen must be revealed. As a secret loyalist to the outcast King Eldacar, I maintain a watchful eye over all of Gondor, searching for others who would see the Usurper thwarted. My father and brother maintain the same felings toward the Usurper, as does my cousin Mórdulin, whom I regard as highly as a sister. It is my hope that some day I will stand beside the once and true king as his counselor, and that Gondor will return to it's full glory.

—played by Jeff Hatch

STRs 13 **CON:** 14 **SIZ:** 15 **INT:** 15 **POW:** 21 **DEX:** 16 **APP:** 14

Skills

Weapon	**SR**	**Attack**	**Damage**	**Parry**	**AP**
Knife	7	43	1D4+2 (+1D4)	30	6
Fist	7	53	1D3 (+1D4)	33	3
Kick	7	38	1D6(+1D4)	—	—
Grapple	7	63	1D6 (+1D4)	54	3

Hit Points: 15	AP
Head: 5	—
LArm:4	3
RArm:4	3
Chest: 6	—
Abdomen: 5	—
L Leg: 5	2
RLeg:5	2

Agility—Climb 46, Dodge 53, Jump 33, Ride Horse 41, Row 33, Swim 33, Throw 45

Communication — Persuade 74, Sing 33, Speak Adunaic 73, Speak Quenya 48, Speak Sindarin 53, Speak Westron 53

Knowledge—Animal Lore 39, Evaluate 30, First Aid 41, Human Lore 45, Mineral Lore 20, Plant Lore 30, World Lore 65, Read/Write Adunaic 71, Read/ Write Quenya 41, Read/Write Sindarin 51, Read/ Write Westron 51

Magic—Armor Skin 40, Endurance 31, Implant Thoughts 42, Light Step 32, Object

Reading 90, Palantír Use 100, Poison Cure 31, Premonition 54, Probe Intentions 90, Resist Mental Probe 90, Self Healing 22, Sensory Overload 42

Manipulation — Conceal 43, Devise 43, Sleight 43

Perception—Listen 88, Perception 80, Scan 100, Search 88, Track 38

Stealth—Hide 27, Sneak 38

Iriel— Priestess of Benish Armon

To many in Gondor, I am a malevolent sorceress intent on destroying all that is good and true; but to my own people, the Ethir-folk, I am a protector and a spiritual leader. They say I consort with demons, yet my lord is of the same kindred as the Powers whom the Dúnedain revere. They accuse me of perverting the innocent, of turning the Faithful to the Darkness; yet I myself have struggled against those who serve the Dark. Who will remember the part I have played, I wonder?

—played by Stefan Ardinger

STR: 9 **CON:** 12 **SIZ:** 10 **INT:** 16
POW: 16 **DEX:** 16 **APP:** 17

Skills

Agility—Climb 45, Dodge 35, Jump 41, Land on Feet 35, Ride 87, Row 55, Swim 55, Throw 35

Communication — Persuade 93, Sing 63, Speak Adunaic 60, Speak T'malshi 55, Speak Sakalai 63, Speak Quenya 50, Speak Sindarin 50, Speak Westron 62

Knowledge—Animal Lore 46, Cat lore 76, Evaluate 36, First Aid 76, Human Lore 96, Mineral Lore 21, Plant Lore 66, World Lore 76, Read/Write Adunaic 53, Read/Write Quenya 10, Read/Write Sindarin 10, Read/Write Westron 51,

Magic — Cat-like Visage 72, Sensory Acuteness 65, Cat's Paw 64, Summon T'malshi 75, T'malshi Senses 81, Mental Illusion 68, Bestow Cat-sight 59, Cat Guardian 67

Manipulation — Conceal 41, Devise 41, Slight 71

Perception — Listen 64, Scan 66, Search 64, Track 60

Stealth—Hide 60, Sneak 66

Hit Points: 11 AP
Head: 4 —
L Arm: 3 —
RArm:3 —
Chest: 5 —
Abdomen: 4 —
L Leg: 4 —
R Leg: 4 —

A CHANCE CROSSING OF WAYS (7 NARWAIN, 1439)

Neithan's, Rastarin's, and Daeron's ships had just left Pelargir and were headed upriver to the Council of Gondor at Minas Anor and the sword at Osgiliath, conveying with them the accused assassin, Draktar (Khoradûr). Suddenly, Tirazôr was spotted in a row-boat in the water just ahead of the convoy, trying frantically to flag Neithan down.

"Pick him up and bring him aboard," yelled Neithan. Tirazôr took the rope offered him and scrambled on board. Nearly breathless, he managed to gasp out: "Lies! Nothing but lies! We've been betrayed, my friends! Lórin and my father never intended for Neithan to have the Sword! In Osgiliath I was betrayed, back-stabbed by my own father! Damn him! When I learned of their betrayal, I fled with that knowledge and was set upon by an entire garrison of soldiers. Indeed, they were determined, and I believe they would have drawn my blood. So it was that as I dispatched two soldiers, I saw not them but Lórin and my father in their place! Who pulls their strings now? And what cause do they follow? Certainly not ours! There is a blockade ahead on the river led by none other than Calimon, Steward of Osgiliath. They seek to stop us and retrieve this..." With that, Tirazôr uncovered the bundle he carried close to him, and there, gleaming in the light, was the Gwaedhel-twin, the Oath-sister, borne by the princes of Mornan for centuries. "Neithan!" cried Tirazôr, "I surrender this freely to you, but I want proof that our cause isjust, and that you do not lead us on a false path!"

Neithan was almost beyond words. "I cannot express my gratitude enough in this dark hour, cousin, for it seems the night is all around us! We must persevere against the watchers who constantly struggle against us in our righteous cause, Tirazôr. I assure you — you, who have put your life on the line for me and our cause —that we will fight against this host of conspirators. We must long consider our plan, and discuss all that we know, for it seems now that you have stepped with both feet into our camp, and for that I am glad. We need your courage in the fight against the Dark Lady and her minions. There is much to tell; let us go below deck and speak where covetous ears are out of reach."

But Daeron threw back his head and laughed. "A fine performance Tirazôr. Strange how your charm seemed absent the last time we met—you couldn't wait to get rid of me to talk to Daddy. Since Daddy did not give you the stewardship of Mornan, is this your new attempt to gain it? I'd bet gold that it was you that hopped aboard my ship so you could take advantage of Neithan in a moment of weakness. There's no way Lórin would have EVER refused the sword to Neithan —it was his idea in the first place. Don't play games with me! I've had a personal conversation with Lórin, who is one of the most generous people I've ever met. I know the entire story, and can make my own character judgments about him.

"What stake, I ask you, does Adrazôr have in opposing the delicate compromise he made himself? Why ever would he want to oppose the Council of Gondor—to start a war? No, that's something I think only Zimrakhil would manifest, and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you and he were in league. I think you realize that if Neithan appeals to the Council, no one would deny him the stewardship; and the only way you could stop such a thing would be to tarnish his reputation in Minas Anor, which is our next destination. Isn't THAT why you are so eager to tag along. Were he to act on your ridiculous story, Neithan would have the rug pulled out from him and his credibility robbed. We thank you for the sword, but you're a bigger fool then I thought if you believe we'll fall for this spuriousness."

"Daeron, do not speak with such haste," countered Neithan. "Let us walk over here where we can discuss this matter further." Neithan led Tirazôr and Daeron over next to the side of the ship. "Daeron, Tirazôr is one of us — obviously betrayed by those whom we suspect of questionable motives. He risked his life for our cause, with valiant and just execution of my request that he ensure that my sword come to me." Neithan clasped Tirazôr on the shoulder. "My most trusted friend, you come with dark tidings of betrayal and conspiracy; are Lórin and Adrazôr in league with my enemy Calimon?"

"I know not," Tirazôr confessed, "but this is indeed a drastic time."

Neithan sighed with a heavy look on his face. "Tirazôr, you have forsaken consanguinal ties to stand for what you believe in, and I admire you for that. I cannot thank you enough for your service to our cause. Never has a man so willfully risked his life for me, and I am deeply moved. I count you the best among friends. But let us now turn to a plan." Neithan turned to look upriver. "Calimon blocks the way to Osgiliath, and he will certainly accuse us of conspiracy against the king if he finds you aboard our convoy. With haste and silence, and under the Covenant of Uinen, I charge you to take my sword into the night, and hide until all matters are decided by the Council. If I am caught with my sword now, they will accuse me of thievery; once I am Prince of Mornan, you will be well rewarded — you, whose noble spirit dwells in the same realm as Isildur. This is our plan, and you alone can take the sword and hide; for all of my men must be accounted for. I will protect you, but we will all find certain doom if you or my sword are found aboard my ship.

"We will go on to meet Calimon in battle if we must, but we shall not know until that fate is revealed to us. I commend you and entrust to you the sword of my forefathers. I bid you farewell until we meet up again and continue our quest, and we will bring war against the Dark Mistress." Neithan looked deep into Tirazôr's eyes. "Until then my cousin." Tirazôr looked up as Neithan helped him into his skiff. Sweat and dirt mingled on his face, but in his eyes there was no sign of fatigue. He gripped the sword, once more covered in a dirty, shredded cloak which bore the device of Belfalas and the color of his family name (now dragged through the mud). Tirazôr's knuckles turned white as his fist closed hard around the hilts.

"They will not take this sword while there is life in me! I'll stand by your side again, and ours shall be the upper hand, if only because our cause is true and just. Until then, farewell." Tirazôr landed his craft on the southward shore of the Great River, and faded into the brush.

The Eglabor, the T.C.B.S., and Daeron's ship continued upriver on their journey towards destiny. Around midday, upon the northern (Lebennin) bank, just ahead of them, they espied three riders, watching them from a distance. Two of the mounted figures wore dark cloaks that concealed their identities, but the man between them all recognized as Lórin, cousin of Tirazôr, Royal Seer of Gondor! He had returned!! He hailed them vigorously, and Neithan spoke.

"You may come aboard Lórin, though I know not of your purpose. I will speak with you. You may even bring your weapons aboard, but you must leave your companions behind on the shore. I question those who keep company with such shades, for they seem evil, and crossing the path of their like bodes ill for any travelers." Neithan commanded two of his men to convey the seer to the Eglabor in a skiff, his archers at the ready.

As Lórin boarded the ship, his hands formed a mystic pass, and he uttered a short prayer to the Lady of the Seas. Lórin fixed his gaze on the archers, and in the distance, dark stormclouds mirrored the seer's temperament. A low rumbling of distant thunder broke even as he spoke. "The 'shades,' as you call them, are friends of mine. To insult them is to insult my honor, and to betray a lack of diplomacy."

For the first time, Lórin s gaze met Neithan's, who witnessed a swirling luminescence in the seer's eyes, flashing in tune with the gathering storm on the dark horizon. "I come seeking Tirazôr, the treacherous son of Adrazôr, who plotted to steal the Gwaedhel-blade and bring it to you, Orodreth. I do not know of your doings in these matters, but your way will be easier were you to tell me what you know of him. You see, he has murdered two of the king's soldiers, and therefore any who aid him will be also guilty of this crime."

The normally quiet and even-tempered seer seemed disturbed, as a tempest that beats upon strong gates that have been barred from within. "If you will cooperate," he continued, "I assure that you will return to your land safely, and that you will be acquitted of any part in this betrayal. I have learned that Tirazôr came this way to meet with you."

"I have not long to reply to you," answered Neithan, "for I am in haste. I will put it simply and say that I know nothing of Tirazôr's whereabouts, and did not tell him to steal the sword. His actions are obviously those of an irrational man. I cannot help you any further, Lórin, though I wish I could; for I am deeply concerned that you let my sword slip from your grasp so easily. Use your mystical sight and retrieve it, cousin. I am complying with the wishes of Adrazôr and making my way to the Council to transfer the princedom of Mornan to Estel my sister. I wish you success in finding my sword, as it was a part of our agreement, and bid you farewell."

Lórin continued to hold Neithan's gaze, unmoved. Then, with no further words, the seer returned to his shadow riders upon the bank. Then only did he speak words to Neithan, crying aloud so that all could hear them. "I go to find the Gwaedhel-blade! It shall not, however, be your sword again, Neithan; for I speak with the Truesight of Westernesse: Your hope for the future lies not in arms but in counsel. Your Doom is woven with tragedy and betrayal, and you have allowed it to fall into the hands of others. If it is happiness that you seek, look for the true path of your life and follow it, though it may seem to you to be the less hopeful. I know you are disregarding my advice, even as I speak; but knowing it, I saw no harm in speaking all the same. Farewell, cousin." With that, the enigmatic seer rode off with his shades.

DAERON AND THE QUEEN (12 NARWAIN, 1439)

Returning from the Council of Gondor, Daeron was summoned by Queen Mûrabêth in Pelargir. As Coratar had discerned, she had been the invisible hand behind the assassin's acquittal at Minas Anor. This she did as payment for a debt that she owed to the man known as Khoradûr. In the previous year (before the assassination of the prince), the queen had drawn upon Khoradûr's skills to eliminate some undesirable suitors who were then seeking the hand of her sister Telerien. Having obeyed her instructions to defend Khoradûr's innocence before the king, Daeron, Mûrabêth had decided, was now worthy of Telerien's hand. Telerien, however, knew nothing of her royal sister's role in the murder of her suitors.

When Daeron arrived at the Lord's House in Pelargir, he found that Telerien, the queen's sister, was also present. She approached him, bearing a golden cup in her hands: "My sister and I are pleased with your safe return from your journey. It is hoped that all has gone well for you. Come, accept this cup as a token of our gratitude." She held the golden cup, filled with fine wine, before him. After handing it to Daeron, she bowed respectfully, and returned to the queen's side. Then Mûrabêth spoke: "Daeron, tell me of the Council. Were you successful?"

"Yes, Queen Mûrabêth, all is well. Except," Daeron's face appeared pained. "Well, except that the assassin who tried to kill me is still at large, and I fear for my life. Why have you summoned me?"

"First, tell us of the Council: what was the verdict on Neithan? On Khoradûr? "As for the one whom you believe has sought your life — Zimrakhil — my spies inform me that he is not in Umbar, but has traveled to a gathering of Southron tribes in Harondor (some kind of annual festival, I believe)."

The squire replied. "Yes, well, the Council reaped great bounty, due to your hand in matters. Khoradûr has been proclaimed innocent, although I think a few such as Lórin and Neithan still believe he committed the crime and lied his way out of it. It was obvious even to me your majesty. However, I respect your wishes, and if it was your desire to have him set free, then I'm sure the reasons are that he has not outlived his usefulness to you. Neithan earned his stewardship. Is there anything else that I can do for you, my queen?"

To anyone else, it would have been imperceptible; but to Daeron, who knew the queen's mannerisms, it was clear that his words had struck a nerve. The queen's face effortlessly grew stone-cold. Daeron was now on deadly ground. "Are you suggesting that I -would consort with a murderer?"

Daeron laughed, "Of course not, my queen. YOU have done nothing. But Khoradûr, well, he has obviously lied, and I think it was clear to all that elements of his defense were at variance with one another. However, there is not an ounce of proof behind the tale that he killed anyone. There is graver news, however, Tirazôr of Belfalas appears to have the Gwaedhel-sword, which is Neithan's by birthright. He seems to have designs for power, and I would be cautious if you have any dealings with him."

Mûrabêth's outward expression remained unmoved by his words, turning instead to her sister. "Leave us, Telerien." When Telerien had exited the audience chamber, Mûrabêth returned her gaze upon Daeron. "A queen must repay her debts, Daeron; but once repaid, her obligations need not be renewed. You know that I had no choice but to provide equal support for Khoradûr and Neithan at the Council. Now that this is done, however, my ties to both have been severed, unless either should seek my friendship. But whether I should receive or reject such overtures is for me to decide."

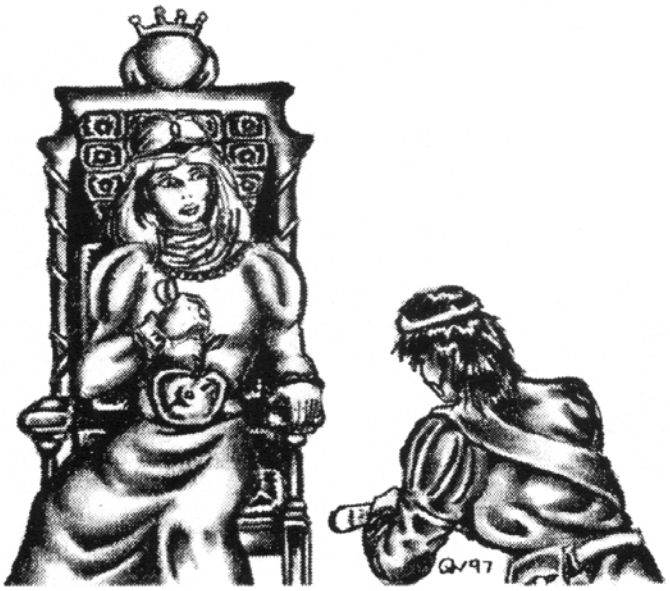
"As my confidante, I would ask your advice on this matter, Daeron; but that is a private matter between you and me. The next time you dare raise such words openly in the hearing of my sister, you shall find in me an enemy to be reckoned with."

"I shall not make such a mistake again, your majesty," apologized Daeron, bowing. "As for young Tirazôr, the royal seer pursues his trail into Harondor. Unless he has powerful friends and more cunning than I would grant the boy, I believe that he will soon be brought back to Pelargir in chains, and the sword with him. Khoradûr, on the other hand, is an assassin — unpredictable and dangerous. He could be used to eliminate your worst enemy Morlaen. But beyond that he perhaps should be eliminated. I can aid you in both of these goals. My request is, as you know, your sister's hand in marriage." Daeron smiles.

"As for Khoradûr, I want nothing more to do with him. At best he is a liability, at worst...well, I suppose we have already seen what he is capable of. Do you have any notion of his motives? I hardly believe that Neithan would hire him to murder his own parents in order to win the rule of Mornan. What do you think? Whatever the tide, Khoradûr is a man who must be watched carefully.

"As for Morlaen, he IS my rival; but dispensing with worthless suitors is one thing, ordering a murder within one's own household is quite another. Let us not forget who and what we are: Dúnedain, the Faithful remnant of Númenor, Truthspeakers above all, and not ones to be lowered to the moral filth of a dark-skinned Southron like Khoradûr."

The squire drew suddenly close to the queen, kneeling at the arm of herthrone. "My queen, if you wish to increase your power, then perhaps you can find the Karma of Aldarion, an item that Neithan currently seeks, but is too consumed with



the murder of his parents to make a proper go of it. There is an artifact called the Karajaz which, when its three parts are united together, forms a map showing the Karma's location. Iriel, my ally holds one of the three pieces; Zimrakhil, I suspect, has the second; the location of the third is unknown. The Karma has some sort of magical power. If you used your influence to find the third piece, you could bargain with Zimrakhil for his, as could I with Iriel; then you would have the map by which you could obtain the Karma."

"The Karma of Aldarion?!?" The neutrality of the queen's face dissolves into a mixture of surprise and amazement. "That is an artifact sacred to the history of Pelargir, and all of Gondor. But the legends say that it was lost many centuries ago. If a map indeed exists showing the way to its resting place, many there are who would strive to claim it as their own; especially with Belfalas and Mornan in turmoil."

"Do you believe that the finding of this Karajaz has any relation to Khoradûr's actions? Or Neithan's, for that matter? You speak of negotiating for these pieces, and of Neithan's present neglect of the chase. Does this mean that you perceive Neithan as a rival to our interests, rather than an ally?"

"Neithan is a rival for the Karma," Daeron conceded, "but you could call in the favor he owes you for attaining the stewardship, and he would drop his claim. Everyone in the world would want the Karma as they did the stewardship, but I'm sure no one knows about it — as yet. The reason I mentioned this to you is because I know you have the resources to discover this. I think at this time you should attempt to capture Tirazôr and get the sword. Also, find out whatever you can—rumor or no — concerning the location of the third piece. That alone is another bargaining chip. I will talk to Zimrakhil. From there we will meet again and plan our next step. As far as Khoradûr is concerned, he seems to have no more use," Daeron paused, his eyes dead, "Kill him."

Mûrabêth paused for a moment in her thought, as though carefully weighing all of the new facts the squire had just brought to light in her hearing. "As for your 'promised reward,' Squire of Linhir, you may consider Telerien's hand secured for your taking. However, let us not speak of this until after you and I have decided upon a concerted path of action. And you have spoken no word as of yet concerning your own suspicions about Zimrakhil. You say that he also possesses a piece of this Karajaz, but what if it truly was he who ordered the attempt on your life in Umbar? How will that affect our potential dealings with him?"

"It seems apparent to me," returned Daeron, "that Zimrakhil intends to gain the Karma of Aldarion, that is why he has a piece of the Karajaz. However, the Karma would give me a reason to talk to him in the first place when I travel to meet him. If your men find Tirazôr and obtain Neithan's sword, then we could use that as a bargaining chip for the Karajaz. True, if Zimrakhil tried to kill me, he might attempt to do so again when I meet him; but the mere fact that I might know the location of the missing third piece of the Karajaz will most likely ensure my livelihood.

"If Zimrakhil is not interested in relinquishing his claim to his piece, then perhaps we could offer an exchange of information or even unite resources to locate the third part. Or, if we got Iriel's piece, then we could offer to copy it for him in exchange for a copy of his own. Or, Zimrakhil might desire something else we could offer—we would have to ask him."

"You have spoken with wisdom and prudence, Daeron my friend," said the queen. "I see now how our possession of one of the pieces of this Karajaz is essential to your continued security in dealing with Zimrakhil. Speak to Iriel about the other piece of the Karajaz; I believe she will be your traveling companion on the road for the next few days, since she is also bound for Linhir.

"As I mentioned earlier, my spies have informed me that Zimrakhil is at some Southron gathering in Harondor. I do not know how long he will stay there, but whether you seek him there or in Umbar, the sea will be your quickest route. It will be least likely to cause attention if you depart from your own town of Linhir rather than here in Pelargir. And you need to see that all is well in Linhir before beginning this new journey. In the meantime, I shall keep watch for Tirazôr, and attempt to persuade the king to hold him here in Pelargir, where we will be able to keep both him and the sword secure from everyone else.

"And now, the hand of my sister. When you have accomplished what you have now set out to do, you shall have my blessing. But I expect you will desire to visit with her now before you go, and see for yourself whether she is willing. She awaits you on the garden terrace outside."

Daeron took his leave of Mûrabêth and walked out onto the terrace surrounding the central courtyard of the Lord's House. There he beheld Telerien, gazing out towards the Garth of Royal Ships. Her head turned as he exited the queen's private audience chamber, and a slight smile curved on her lips.

Daeron greeted her, kneeling as he bestowed a kiss upon her outstretched hand. "Lady Telerien, I hope I find you well. Your sister and I have been discussing the Karma of Aldarion, and hope to win it for your family: it would bring great power and influence. Mûrabêth believes that the attainment of this quest should mark the hour of our matrimony." Daeron took her hand again, and looked into her eyes. "But those are Mûrabêth's thoughts. What are yours? Surely you too seek something as a condition to our marriage. How do regard me? I would gladly take you to wife, but only if you desire it."

Daeron felt a slight tremble of anticipation in her hand as it met his lips.

Telerien strove to maintain her composure, all her hopes and fears

racing beneath her breast. Then at last she breathed a sign of relief, and laughed.

"How shall I answer so many questions at once, Lord Daeron?" She hesitated again, regaining her composure. "Your words...bring joy to my heart." A tear ran down her cheek as she drew a deep breath.

"Ever since my father sent me to dwell in the court of my sister and queen, I have known neither peace nor happiness—the courtiers, the suitors, their quarrels over me...their deaths," she shivered, "the sleepless nights, not knowing what the next day would bring for me, feeling helpless for myself. You don't know how I have longed for an end to it." She wiped a few more tears from her eyes — tears of relief and joy.

"I am sister to the Queen of Gondor, honor-bound to abide by her decision of whom I am to marry....and now YOU ask me under what 'condition' I will accept this troth?" She paused again as her tears began to subside. And then, recalling to herself the dignity and pride of her house, she answered with clear eyes: "I would wed thee, Daeron, on the condition that there might be peace between us, happiness, friendship...love. For THESE things no suitor has ever promised me; and yet without them, we are nothing. What say you, Squire of Linhir? Would he seek with me these treasures all the days of our mortal lives? Or do they fall upon your ears as the foolish longings of a maiden blind to the ways of this world?"

Daeron kissed her hand again. "Telerien, I would not have it otherwise. Love is freedom, and I have no intention of binding you. The day your decisions, your freedom, and your life ceases will be the day our wedlock should prove itself unworthy of your grace. No — happiness, friendship, and love shall adorn our union as none other has known."

THE SECRET MEETING IN LINHIR (15 NARWAIN, 1439)

Following the Council of Gondor held in Minas Anor at the beginning of 1439, the second year of the Usurper's reign, Neithan, Daeron, Kunbeshu, Iriel, and two others — Shadia and Celebriel — held a secret meeting at Linhir aboard Kunbeshu's vessel, the Nenduhir, to discuss their respective plans for the future...

Iriel stood waiting to greet Neithan as he boarded the Nenduhir. With a smile, she greeted the newly-appointed Steward of Mornan in the tongue of the Ethir-folk. "It has been a while, young lord;" and then, in Westron, "We have much to talk about."

"Greetings Iriel," said Neithan, gazing out upon the Linhir estuary. "I am glad you have decided to meet so soon after my appointment. There are certain matters I would like to discuss with you. Firstly, I need you to do a little something to further our cause in the Ethir. I also have many questions, but am sure that you will address them on your own initiative. I believe that you and I remain committed to the same cause." Neithan paused for a moment, andthen continued. "There is a man in league with the Dark Lady—Amrûkh's contact in Pelargir — his name is Dórmir, kinsman to Castamir's cousin, Alandur. He must die. I want you and Colfen to kill him."

The Ethir priestess' eyes opened slightly, irony filling her expression. "You presume to tell me who to kill? Only a few short weeks ago you sought to brand my brother and me as renegades because of a young maiden's death on Tolfalas. Do you bid us kill only when it suits your purposes?" Iriel saw that her words had unsettled her erstwhile ally, but she continued before he could retort. "Perhaps we could achieve this deed, Colfen and I; however, finding my brother at the moment might prove a bit of a problem. We've had a disagreement of sorts." She shrugged. "And I am very far from being an assassin." Her eyes focused directly on Neithan. "Were I to 'arrange' for this Dormir's death, Neithan, how would that forward my lord's bid for freedom? You certainly have not agreed to release him when your other promises are done with."

"Iriel," Daeron broke in, trying to head off the question, "when we were all together on Tolfalas for the funeral of Neithan's parents, you said that you had met the assassin face-to-face. Later on, when this alleged murderer was apprehended, he claimed that he was innocent of wrongdoing—that YOU had worked some kind of sorcery on him. What do you say to this?"

"Sorcery and murder?" said Iriel, gazing at the squire with level eyes, "Let me tell you, Daeron, I have seen a lot of plotting by parties unknown and unseen; and (as you know?) I have been present many times during the conception of said 'plans.' The murder of Neithan's parents, for instance. I was visiting Mornan with Tirazôr for Estel's birthday."

Iriel drew a breath, pausing, and then began her tale. "It was late at night, and I was in the prince's library, when I heard people speaking outside. I went to investigate, and saw the late prince speaking with one of his advisors. I could not clearly hear what they where speaking of, but I did notice two people in the bushes, on opposite sides of the courtyard. One was Tirazôr — he was closest—and I could see him fairly well. The other I could not see, but I later discovered that person was (and is) 'Khoradûr,' for I met him on the road to Mornan, and Estel's description of him was unmistakable.

"As for Khoradûr's capture on Tolfalas, I know nothing of the murder Neithan speaks of, save what my brother recounted to me afterwards. He made his mistake, and we have parted company for it. I do not know where he is. I do know that Khoradûr was on the isle, simply because he leaves a 'trace' which (if one knows what to look for) can be perceived. I assumed he was looking to kill someone else—like Estel or Celebriel, so I acted. And your testimony has allowed that murderer to escape!" Iriel's eyes darkened, full of concern. "Who knows whom he will make an attempt on

next? But as with everything else, mistakes are made, and should be corrected."

Iriel rose to her feet, and began to pace the cabin floor. "Somehow, that sorcerer Zimrakhil is wrapped up in this mess. He knew too much when I last spoke with him to be innocent." She halted, looking out a window towards the river. "As for needing help, I need Neithan's aid most of all. Without it, there is little hope for my people."

A long silence followed. Neithan brooded. Then, Daeron spoke in his most conciliatory tone. "As for myself, if your people need help in the Ethir, I have my own men here in Linhir, as well as numerous contacts. If your request is reasonable, perhaps I can be of assistance. What sort of help is required?

As far as Khoradûr, it was assumed that he was guilty of all his crimes, including the murder of Neithan's parents and the attempt on my life. But we thought that he had a partner behind these assassinations, and that is whom we hope to discover by releasing him. We think that person might be Zimrakhil. Hence, my next destination is Umbar, where I will attempt to gather information. Would you be interested in accompanying me?"

Iriel replied. "If it were strength of arms my people needed, Neithan's River Guard would have been enough. But my people suffer from more than swamp-roving brigands, Daeron—things that no army can defeat nor healer treat. Only my lord's freedom can save them, and only Neithan himself can grant that; yet this cannot come to pass until Neithan has fulfilled his oath to Zimrakhil, a promise that was extracted under duress. Perhaps you and I should undertake to exchange what we know of Zimrakhil."

"As for Khoradûr," she continued, "I do not believe he owns any master (though I may be wrong). I only know what I have seen, and cannot attest to anything else. But whether or not he serves another, he is dangerous; Neithan, Estel, as well as others (including myself) may be his targets. Why, even you may be his next victim, Daeron. At any rate, it may not be Zimrakhil behind the killings after all, but some other, third party, unknown and unseen, whose motives cannot yet be fathomed. This is a possibility that I have considered for some time, but have no proof."

Daeron looked troubled, turning to Neithan. "I was not aware you had made a pact with a sorcerer, Neithan. Is it true?"

At last, Neithan spoke with heated indignation. "I curse the day that I swore those words to Zimrakhil! Yet there was no other way to save our lives. On the evening that you were attacked in Umbar, Iriel, Kunbeshu, Shadia, Tirazôr and I rode out of the city to a place in the desert to meet with Zimrakhil. He told us that in coming to him we had fallen into a trap laid by Iriel's treacherous half-brother, and that Zimrakhil would die there with us, unless he used his sorcery to summon fell beasts of the air to return us to Umbar safely. But Zimrakhil refused to save either us or his own life, unless I swore an oath upon that red stone that Iriel wears about her neck. The oath I swore was this: not to use my authority to free Iriel's master from his imprisonment until I had brought all the remaining pieces of the Karajaz to Zimrakhil. He promised that he would not withhold the Karajaz from me, but I believe that he desired most to constrain Iriel to aid me, since I alone have the power to release her master, and with my oath sworn she would not take action contrary to Zimrakhil's plans (whatever those are)."

"That is apparently so, Neithan," Iriel conceded, though with little love in her voice. "However, your promise does not prevent me from working against Zimrakhil, it only stops me from killing him." The priestess gave a wry smile.

"So, Neithan," said Daeron, "you made an oath? Well, it seems then that it is best not to break it, but don't go looking for the Karma, If I were you, and I saw Zimrakhil again, I would take care not to have the Karajaz on my person. Giving any one of its three fragments to such a cunning, hideous, and evil man may prove your downfall in the future, my prince. Perhaps it would be wisest to leave whatever you have of the map here, with someone else who has not sworn to the oath; that way, if Zimrakhil threatens to kill you for not having the Karajaz, you will not lie when you say you don't have it. A sorcerer such as he can detect a lie from the greatest actor."

Then Iriel spoke to Daeron. "If your destination is Umbar, I may join you there." And, with a slight smile, she added "To my knowledge, Neithan does not possess any part of the Karajaz. I am certain, however, that Zimrakhil knows who has the piece, which is why I cannot take any risks until I am assured of my lord's freedom." She drew a deep breath. "I myself will eventually have to find Zimrakhil, and I believe that he will not be easily bothered. But if you, Daeron, become too bothersome, he may kill you. I fear that it was Zimrakhil himself that swayed my wayward half-brother in Umbar to lure me into his trap.

"I believe that Zimrakhil has some hidden agenda—to gain control of both Neithan and my lord in one move. It is with this foreboding that I undertake my journey, Daeron. More I cannot say. If word were to travel of what I intend to do, Zimrakhil would certainly deal with me." Sighing, the priestess turned towards Neithan. "All this for one person."

Neithan, perturbed, retorted suddenly. "I swore an oath, in haste; and had I not, this conversation would not be taking place—we would all be dead, and Zimrakhil with us. What's done is done, and I must reap its consequences, whatever they may be. But as for the Karma of Aldarion, that is a quest I cannot at present undertake, whether I will or no; for the path that I have chosen for myself yokes me to Duty. So long as I am steward to my sister, it will be less easy for me to take leave of the Mornan, to which I am now bound. But Zimrakhil and the Karma lie to the South, where Kunbeshu must sail. And if it is your decision to accompany him on that road, then I must part company with you now. As for the Karajaz, I possess none of its three pieces. For that (I believe) you must speak with our good lady, here." Neithan's incriminating gaze fell upon Iriel, hinting perhaps that he had disclosed more than Iriel would have wanted. Then his gaze returned to Daeron.

"The fate of the Karma and of the Karajaz that shows the way to its hiding place is in my hands no longer, and you must take counsel with yourselves what action is best. There are other matters of which I had desired to speak at further length with some of you, but the tide is rising, and the Nenduhir must soon set sail, and I must go to Mornan. I shall send further word to you by courier, as time permits. For now, I must take my leave of you, and give thought to the care of what remains of my family and its lands. I am grateful to you all for advocating my case at the Council of Gondor, and I will not forget it when kinder times are upon us."

With that, Neithan bade farewell: "Captain Kunbeshu, I thank you for the hospitality of your vessel in making this meeting possible. I congratulate you on your appointment as Ambassador to the Raj, and wish you fair winds for your voyage to Umbar, and beyond."

"Daeron, my friend; your wise and prudent counsel has been a comfort to me these last weeks since our meeting on Tolfalas. The deeds that I would achieve in our common cause are now in your hands. Take care."

"Iriel, scarcely three months have passed since my eyes first beheld you in the Ethir; and yet, -within that brief span of days, those same eyes have looked upon secrets long hid from the sight of Men. Self-knowledge I have gained, but at a terrible cost to those whom I love. I do not hold you responsible for the murder of that innocent girl on Tolfalas, Iriel, for you had no part in the deed, being near death yourself; yet Colfen's hands committed evil for the sake of the same power that you yourself serve. Maybe it is your fate to serve this creature, but I cannot be at peace with such a being. Not now, at any rate. Yet things may change, ere the end, and I pray that before my destiny is full-wrought, we shall meet as friends rather than as foes. Who can say what the future may bring? But know this, Iriel of Benish Armon, my destiny will be my own, and not governed by another power, whatever its purposes."

"Lady Celebriel, when I came upon your ship, stranded in the Ethir by that pirate Amrûkh, I would not have guessed that your fate would be revealed as bound up, somehow, with our common plight. And yet I count myself fortunate to have your company on this dark journey, though I must leave it now, for the present. Farewell."

With that, Neithan departed the cabin and joined the mounted company, bound for the Mornan. Evening had fallen, and Kunbeshu announced that the Nenduhir would be ready to sail to Umbar at daybreak.

Daeron was the first to speak. "I believe that Zimrakhil tried to kill me once, Iriel; if he tries again, I wall not be unprepared. I go into the situation with my eyes open. But what is life? We all die. I fear not dying. If I see you in Umbar, I join you then."

But Iriel shook her head mournfully as she watched Neithan's company depart.

"I may not even see the end of the month. I hope Neithan knows of someone else who is willing to aid him against Zimrakhil, because I cannot do so now — not without taking risks. His work is his own, I suppose." Drawing a deep breath of resignation, the priestess closed her eyes. "Perhaps for the better. I will see you in Umbar, Daeron." Opening her eyes, cold and emotionless, she gazed at Daeron. "I have tasks to attend to. If you will excuse me." And with that, she returned to her own cabin.

Later that evening, Iriel paid a visit to Kunbeshu. "Captain? If I may have a word with you, I must discuss the matter of the third piece of the Karajaz."

The old sea-dog raised an eye-brow. "I was wondering when you would bring that matter up. But let us speak in the privacy of your cabin." Once inside, Kunbeshu took his seat and offered Iriel the same. "Well, lass; I take it the plans have changed since our parting of ways with Neithan."

"Yes, Kunbeshu. Plans have changed a little — not enough to make a difference now, but later perhaps." Iriel was silent for a moment, contemplating her options. "I will need to set ashore somewhere that will show me the way to the Haruze city of Amrûn. I have brought with me some provisions. The rest I will likely be able to purchase there. It is there that I must begin my search. When I am done, I will be returning to Umbar to meet with Daeron." She smiled, but seemed drained and tired.

Kunbeshu was surprised at her destination. "Amrûn? That lies many leagues upriver from Ethir Harnen, and the Nenduhir is too deep of draft to go that way. I will have to set you ashore when we reach Gobel Mirlond near the mouth of the Harnen estuary. You should be able to obtain whatever traveling supplies you may need there."

"That will be sufficient. Your help has been invaluable, Captain."

"Anything for a pretty lady," the captain jibed, grinning.

THE HUNTERS RETURN (25 NARWATN, 1439)

Having pursued Tirazôr to the Mountain of Power, Lórin, Telcontar, and the other Messengers of the Dead — Cealen and Celebrin—returned to Pelargir defeated by Zimrakhil's machinations, bringing with them Tirazôr himself as their only consolation. Having embarked on their chase prior to the fateful Council that raised Neithan to the stewardship and acquitted Khoradûr (Draktar) of murder, the four hunters are met by Clennan, another Messenger whom they had instructed to remain behind to gather news in their absence.

The hunters stood upon the east bank of the mighty River Anduin, opposite Pelargir, awaiting a barge to ferry them across. There they were met by Clennan, who recounted to them the strange reversals of the Council. "The Council of Gondor has concluded," Clennan reported, "and the king and his court have all returned to Pelargir. Neithan is now the Steward of Mornan. Rastarin has assumed Neithan's former position as Captain of the River Guard. When Estel reaches her majority, both she and her brother will be given a hearing before the Council of Gondor, to see which one desires or is fit to rule the Mornan."

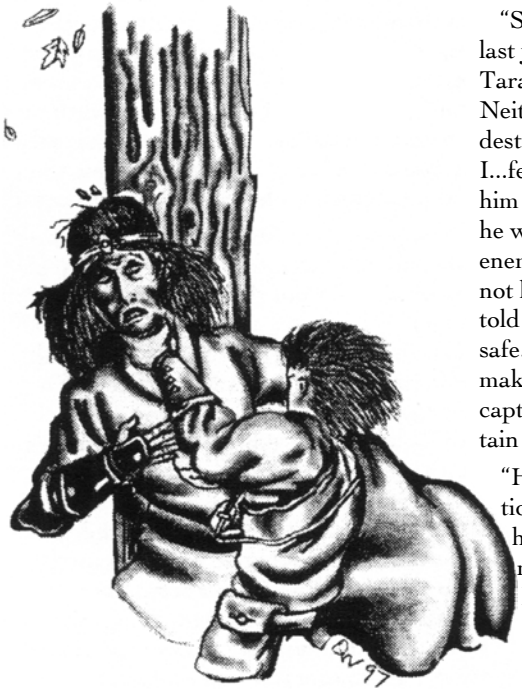
"But there's more. Back on Tolfalas, just after you had left the funeral, Lórin, there were dark happenings: Tirazôr's tutor Iriel was fatally wounded by a cat with poisoned claws. Mórdulin tried to heal her, but was unable to defeat the venom. According to Neithan (who was the only one who witnessed what happened next), his own Ethir lieutenant, Colfen, was revealed with Iriel to be an evil cultist of some sort. Savagely murdering a local village girl as a human sacrifice, Colfen called upon dark forces to bring Iriel back to life and to transform her attacker (the cat with the poisoned claws) into a MAN, a Southron whom Estel identified as the murderer of her and Neithan's parents. Neithan banished Colfen and his sister from his presence for the evil deed they had committed, and soon after ordered the warden of the island to send his men to apprehend and bring them to justice."

"When he came to consciousness, the 'catman' claimed not to know where he was or how he got there. He named himself Khoradûr, a kindly and peace-loving merchant from the Raj, who had come to Gondor to trade his -wares. He said that he had been captured by Iriel and Colfen's wicked sorcery and turned into a cat. He remembered nothing more. Shadia thought that this Khoradûr was her long-lost brother 'Draktar,' but he denied even knowing who she was (however, a tattoo was found on his shoulder identifying him — so Shadia claimed—as a member of her tribe). The poison found on his claws (while still a cat) was identical to that used to assassinate Neithan's and Estel's parents."

"It was decided to bring this Khoradûr with them before the Council of Gondor to stand trial for the accusations leveled against him. However, at the Council, Khoradûr was miraculously acquitted of all suspicion—and Neithan, Daeron, and Kunbeshu all defended him!!!!! But followed this Khoradûr secretly after the Council dis-

banded and he had left the city, and tracked him to a lonely hilltop near Lossarnach, where I saw him begin to chant evil words of sorcery, summoning a fell beast of the air which bore him away south into the moonless sky."

Lórin flew into a rage at Clennan's words, smashing his fists repeatedly against the nearest thing that was slightly less resilient than himself. From his mouth issued a single cry "NEITHAN!" Whirling on the captive Tirazôr, Lórin lifted and pinned him against a nearby tree, digging his strong fingers into the soft flesh of Tirazôr's princely neck. "If you think that the agony you endured under Zimrakhil was painful, then you will not survive the treatment I will subject you to if your treacherous mouth does not sing all you know about the sorcerer, the assassin, and that cat-woman Iriel! I will know whether you speak truth or lie, and do not think that you can run to anyone for help! You have wrought your own fate by allying yourself with my accursed cousin, whose consorting with Witches and Demons have brought death and ill to our own family."



Lorin's fury met the eyes of a frightened boy—stripped of his life's ambitions and despairing of any hope of redemption for his crimes against the king and against his own family. Remorse for his wrongs swelled as the tears in his bloodshot eyes; yet he did not avert them from the piercing glance of will. "I will tell you everything, Lorin; and may Death find me swiftly, and not suffer this wretch to continue to defile the name of our family."

His face stern as iron, Lórin lowered Tirazôr to his feet, releasing his vice-grip on his neck. Tirazôr, hardly daring to catch his breath, began his sorrowful tale. "It...it began when father sent me to Pelargir, to the Hall of the Faithful, for study. That was when I first met Iriel — a year and a half ago, before the king seized the Hall for the Côr Aran. Parmandil made Iriel my tutor. She was looking for something there — an ancient book—and I helped her to find it."

"The book contained the words of Tarannon Falastur, the twelfth king. In its pages he spoke of his wife, Berúthiel; how she bound to herself ten magical cats; how she began to waste away from some strange ailment; and how she gave birth to a child—though our histories say that she was childless. Iriel told me that this child was important, that it might secretly have living descendants in Gondor even now, six hundred years later; that such a descendant could hold great power and dominion over Men, over Kingdoms, over Death itself. She promised me...power, if I would help her find this descendant."

"So we traveled to see you in Minas Anor last year, to determine the identity of King Tarannon and Queen Berúthiel's child: it is Neithan. I wanted to help him fulfill his destiny, so that I could share in his power. I...feared that you and father would deny him the sword unless I took it for him. But he would not take it yet. He said that his enemies in Osgiliath and Minas Anor must not know that it was in his possession, so he told me to steal away with it to someplace safe. He didn't tell me where. I wanted to make for Umbar, but...Zimrakhil's people captured me and brought me to the Mountain of Power.

"He took the sword. He....asked me questions....searched my mind in my dreams his eyes are always there. They pierce my soul like daggers! There is no peace left within me."

Lórin turned to his compatriots. "It is difficult to -watch the visions you have seen come true, and your family—those whom you love — die. I have beheld the demon Iriel consorts with — it is more powerful and evil than anything the Mountain of Power could send against us. I believe that it may have a hand in the trouble that comes to my family. Through Neithan, Iriel learned much of our line and, with her, devised plans to have my aunt and uncle killed.

"I must now go to the king and tell him of all the treachery that comes the way of the royal house and the house or Mornan. From there I will go to sow the seeds of justice against Iriel, Colfen, and I will find the truth behind this Khoradûr." The fire of rage was drained from the seer, his face grew pale and, looking out over the waters of Anduin towards the Mornan, he made a silent vow. "Neithan, you will fall by my hand!"

Soon, Lórin and the hunters stood before Castamir in Pelargir, and the seer revealed to him the threat that he now perceived. "My king, I mean no ,disrespect, as I think that you have made many sound judgments in the past, but you have allowed a killer and a traitor to go free, and I am honor bound to oppose this. I have learned from Tirazôr that Khoradûr's true name is Draktar, the murderer of my aunt and uncle. He was guided by another through ancient evil sorcery that bears the taint of Queen Berúthiel and her cats."

"Neithan is the only one who can set free these imprisoned demons, and only on the accursed ruins of the Temple of Melkor in Umbar. He made a deal with Zimrakhil, the false prophet of the Haradrim, to release the cats, and to place their power in Zimrakhil's hands. The woman Iriel and her brother are behind the association of the cats with Neithan. They unfortunately learned that Neithan was the descendant of Berúthiel from myself, but I believe it was fated that they would have learned this knowledge in any event."

"The creature they serve has the power to see through the *palantíri* from whenever or wherever it is viewed — it looked at me across the span of centuries ! I believe that Neithan will let free the cats, and Zimrakhil will then slowly spread their darkness from the borders of Harondor to the very heart of the realm. I believe that Iriel was responsible for the death of my relatives, as was her brother. Khoradûr is deep within their influence."

"I wish to be released from your service as royal seer and warden of the Anor-stone, so that I might devote every last ounce of my power towards their destruction. I require only your blessing, and perhaps any elite officers you care to impart, but I believe that this matter is going to require speed and secrecy, as all our enemies are sorcerously powerful."

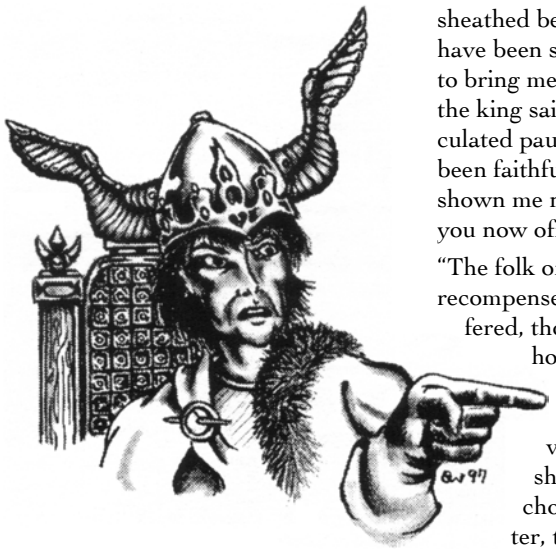
The king's face grew grave at Lorin's impassioned report of what appeared to

be all the elements of a major political and military threat to Gondor. "The Dead spoke true when they prophesied that the sword of Mornan would be claimed by the hand of one whose very existence threatened the line of the kings! The Steward of Mornan must not be allowed to bring that threat to pass. Neithan, offspring of that sorcerous witch Berúthiel; Zimrakhil, a prophet of war with unlimited power over the Haradrim armies; Draktar, assassin and murderer of Gondor's best blood; Colfen and Iriel, servants of some ancient supernatural evil within our own borders. All these threads now weave together into a single tapestry: war, bloody war upon Gondor and all that we Men of the West have held dear and struggled for so many centuries. It must be put to an end!"

"I curse now the day that I -was led by the will of the Council to be deceived by the fair-seeming words of Neithan and his band of supporters! They have won the first round, but we shall not permit them to advance further in their blasphemous conspiracy. I see now the game they are playing! Neithan and Khoradûr have made their bid for legitimacy in the eyes of the Council through my pardoning of them from any suspicion, and now any open attempt I make to rescind my verdicts will make me look duplicitous and unjust. We must therefore proceed with the utmost secrecy and caution!"

"As of now I invest you, Lórin, with authority to command the servants of the king and any resources needed to annihilate this threat to the security of the realm. My cousin Caramir will assist and advise you in this. And for you — Messengers of the Dead who have borne these tidings to my ear—you are free to go as you will, and to aid us in the hour of our need, if that be your pleasure. I leave Neithan, Draktar, Colfen and Iriel to your hands. I shall see to the other threats."

"The Cat-cult in the Ethir: I shall command Rastarin and her men to locate and suppress all manifestations of Iriel and Colfen's influence. And in Umbar, I will order the foundations of the temple destroyed. As for those Southron companies in Gondor who may be loyal to Zimrakhil, I will send them on a mission into Dunfearan, and abandon them there to the savagery of the Daen war-clans. There is but one matter remaining: the sword. Will Neithan seek it out? And, if so, what powers will it grant him to further his ends?"



Telcontar turned to the king and replied, "Your majesty, I humbly thank you for releasing me from the oath I swore to you in regards to bringing before you the one that would lay claim to the Sword of Mornan. I regret only that I was not able to bring him before you at this moment, so that this wretched war could be avoided. But please know that I and my faithful companions did our best to capture the Gwaedhel-blade and he that laid claim to it."

"As for myself, your majesty, I am not a man of war, and have no desire to join in this bloody affair. I am the son of a simple sheepherder, and would prefer to worry about the health of my people's folks before the bloodline of the kings. Yet I will join this quest in search of Neithan and will bring him to justice on these conditions: first, that the people of my village be compensated for all they lost at the hands of your corrupt officers; secondly, that they be given safe passage out of Gondor, if they so choose to leave this kingdom; and thirdly, that I be given the best horse that you can procure, so that I may swiftly return to my family after Neithan is apprehended."

"If you -will offer me these three simple requests, then I will wield Gwaedhel in this war in order to secure the blood of the kings." Telcontar unsheathed the Oathsister, so that her glory was beheld by all in the chamber. "As you know, she is the twin to the sword that Neithan so lusts after. I have faith that her destiny and mine will overcome the evil that Neithan wishes to unleash through her twin. How do you say? Will you accept my terms, your majesty?"

At first taken aback by Telcontar's unexpectedly bold words, Castamir looked in wonder upon the ancient blade now unsheathed before him. "It seems that you have been sent from the Paths of the Dead to bring me the doom of choice, Telcontar," the king said grimly. After a brief but calculated pause, he answered: "You have been faithful in your oaths to me, and have shown me no harm. For this and for the aid you now offer, I grant you these terms.

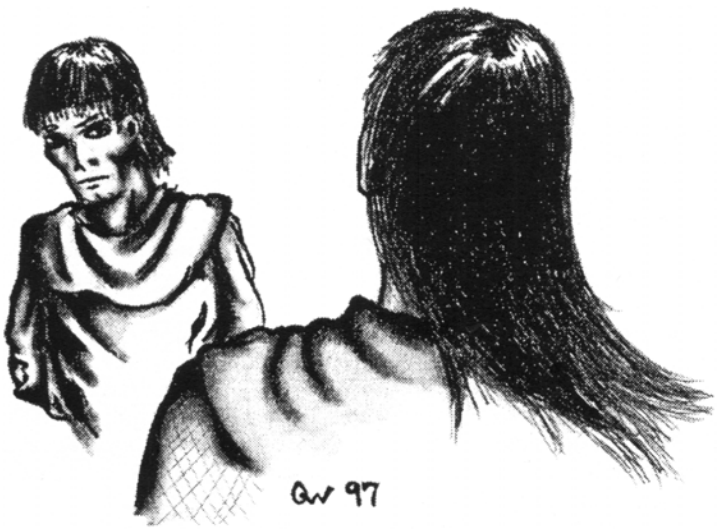
"The folk of Dunlostir shall receive just recompense for the wrongs they have suffered, though I did not command it. The household and folk that bore into the world a messenger such as Telcontar should enjoy my favor, in this as in all things, but should it come into their minds to choose for themselves another master, then this freedom I give to them —and to you, Telcontar, though I deem you already the agent of a higher power. As for a mount, you have the choice of my stables here in Pelargir; yet news of this might better be sent by one of my own messengers, for time is of the essence in bringing Neithan s insurrection to a halt."

A DEAL'S A DEAL
(12 NINUI 1439)

Scarcely three -weeks after the Usurper began mustering his strength to destroy the insurrection Lórin had warned him of, another meeting of great consequence was taking place beneath the Mountain of Power, a meeting that would lead Neithan to claim the Gwaedhel-blade and confront the source of evil that seemed to drive all paths to a dark conclusion. The agent of this was the least likely candidate anyone could have imagined: Darion, a street punk from Minas Anor. But Darion was special,

for he had Zimrakhil, deadliest of sorcerers, in his debt.

Darion looked up at the sorcerer with a sly grin. "You certainly are a hard man to find, Zimrakhil. You know, with the current political turmoil and you not being around for so long, I was afraid that you were not going to fulfill the second part of our deal. You still have not answered my question, and I would hate to see all my work to retrieve the Vase of Dreams proven vain. When I heard that woman Celebriel asking around about you, I figured that the best way to find you was to tag along. When we got here, I ditched them, knowing that I could find you quicker by myself." Glancing around at the guards who had captured him, the youth added "I didn't realize it would be quite 'this' easy."



As he addressed Zimrakhil, Darion was keenly aware that the Southron ambassador's eyes were watching him intently, like a predator surveying its prey, waiting for the slightest change of expression, or tone of voice, or nervous movement, that might betray his hidden intentions. Fortunately, Darion's long years of street life had graced him with a carefully maintained poker face. Instinctively, he sized-up Zimrakhil, searching for a weak point to strike at in defense, should that become necessary for survival; but the youth had the distinct feeling that even this well-honed skill of his would not go unmarked by the sorcerer.

A long, uncomfortable silence followed as Darion's words trailed off. For several moments, the gaunt Southron stared back at the boy without saying anything, his face impassive and as cold as stone. Doubt began to gnaw at Darion s gut—Did Zimrakhil believe his story? Or did he see through his evasions? How would he respond? Time slipped away. Darion felt sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. Why had he not responded?! ? Why didn't he say anything?! ? A sudden urge seized the youth—to tell him everything, to surrender the whole truth, and crave his mercy. Even now, Darion felt the urge welling up inside of him, working its way out, struggling to reach his lips, longing to betray him....

And then, suddenly, the silence was broken — but not by Darion. Just when his will -was about to break, just when he was almost wholly within the power of the sorcerer's iron will, a smile curved on Zimrakhil's lips, and he broke out into unexpected laughter, loud and reckless laughter, whose echoes reverberated throughout the measureless caverns beneath the Mountain of Power.

The echoes persisted for many long moments, even after Zimrakhil had ceased, growing dimmer and dimmer as the sounds sought a way of escape from this vast subterranean fortress; but in the end they were strangled, lost in the eternal night of the abyss. It was not a heartening experience, but at least he was free from the uncontrollable longing to lose his will under the Southron's gaze. But Zimrakhil's mood had now changed to its usual urbane facade, diplomatic and jovial. No longer did his hawk-like eyes seek to pierce Darion's mind. But the boy was not wholly comforted by the realization that Zimrakhil could do it again if he wanted to, and then Darion would surely be lost.

At last, Zimrakhil spoke: "Well met, young Darion! Your unflagging perseverance to see to unfinished business recommends your upright moral character. I commend you." With that, the Southron bowed to him respectfully, as he would to an emissary of some foreign power. Then he continued: "My deepest apologies for my untimely departure from the hospitality of your city, my good man; and for the many hardships you must have suffered to locate me. But surely you have not come all this way merely to confirm that the Vase of Dreams was safely within my keeping? Come now! Perhaps I can be of some assistance to you."

Looking at Zimrakhil with a slight smirk, Darion responded. "Ah, it is true that my travel here has a dual purpose, and that being the case, perhaps there is something you can do for me. There is a man on his way here—or perhaps already here—who has come to treat with you. He mistakenly believes that he has something that you want, and that he is the only one who knows its hiding place. In Gondor, this man is known as the Straight Man. The thing that he claims to have possession of is now held by that unusual woman that I traveled here with.

"This thing that Celebriel holds, this 'key' as she put it, must be very valuable. And it must be, at the least, a bit distressing; for a man to come here and attempt to force you to deal with him, when in actuality he can no longer hand over the goods. Therefore, I propose a deal. You still owe me payment, which I would be willing to forgo, if the life of this poor soul could be placed in my hands." A cruel and wicked smile quickly passed over Darion's face. "Oh, and

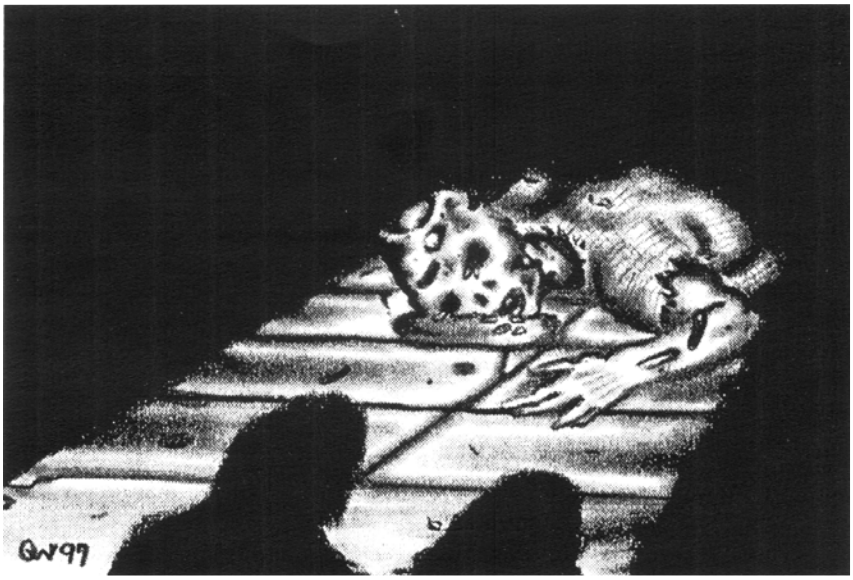
once that is done, perhaps you would like to hire me to hunt down and eradicate my newfound companions. Perhaps I could retrieve this thing, this key, for you. This would all be for a price of course. And as you know, my prices are always reasonable." Darion's cold laughter filled the chamber.

Zimrakhil responded evenly: "The man whom you seek has already arrived; indeed, he has been staying with us for the last few days. Shall we pay him a visit?" The Southron gestured for Darion to follow him out of the room, accompanied by his guards. As they walked down the torch-lit corridor, Zimrakhil resumed their conversation: "As usual, you are quite well-informed as to our situation. This Straight Man has belied his name, and has gone back on his word. Some of my friends in Pelargir approached him several days ago, to negotiate a business transaction involving the recovery of this key, which was then in the possession of these wicked Ethir-folk whom, I have only recently discovered, have been marked for extermination at the hand of the king's justice — fomenting rebellion and the like, no doubt.

"Anyway, the Straight Man agreed to aid my friends in the location and recovery of this thing. They were successful, but the Straight Man murdered my friends, and claims to be holding the key as surety for better payment. An outrage! Until this moment, though, I feared that our prize was indeed held for ransom by the Straight Man, and that he would surely have his way with us. I can't believe the insolence! It is well that you are here to remedy this, young Darion. I feel certain that your custody will like him less than our gentle care."

They reach the bottom of a stairwell, and a doorway was opened. The darkness beyond exuded a stench of immeasurable corruption and decay. As one of the guards covered his nose and entered the room with a torch, Zimrakhil hailed its occupant: "Awaken, master Straight Man! We have a visitor 4 for you." As his -words ended, the torchlight illuminated the half-eaten, rat and leech-infested remains of what was once a living man, chained hand and foot to the stone -wall of this inhuman dungeon. "Oh dear," said Zimrakhil mockingly, "I'm afraid our guest has already committed himself to another dinner engagement."

As his stomach revolted at the sight and stench, Darion felt the Southron's cold hand rest upon his shoulder, accompanied by the sonorous chant of his voice: "I fear,



young Darion, that in your eagerness to aid us you have already anticipated our purpose. But now perhaps we can, as you say, strike a bargain, if you have spoken truly to me concerning the key. For your sake, I pray that you have. The task? Bring to me this woman with the key. The reward? TOTAL POWER over the underworld of Pelargir and Minas Anor — or whatever other prize you pine for. I sincerely hope that you find these terms agreeable." With that, the door to the Straight Man's fate slammed shut.

CHANGING ALLEGIANCES
(24-25 NÍNUI, 1439)

As it happened, Darion agreed to help Zimrakhil with a different task: to draw Neithan into the Mountain of Power, where he might claim the Gwaedhel-blade under conditions more to the sorcerer's liking. But Zimrakhil had not counted on Lórin's accompaniment of Neithan on this journey (believing the two men to have become thoroughly estranged). Through Lórin's sacrifice, Darion and Neithan managed to escape the Mountain with their lives. From there, Neithan continued on his way to Umbar; but Darion had other plans...

The two lone travelers stole along the edge of the Mountain's foothills, both exhausted from the rigors of their flight from the Dark Lady that lurked in its depths. Night was again falling across the land. Darion, with his boy-like features, gazed out into the shadows with a thoughtful look on his face, and what could only be described as a longing. Turning to Neithan, he spoke. "Neithan, I am sorry for all that transpired as it has, but I think in the end things turned out right. That is, except for our friend Lórin."

"Of course, that cannot be helped now. It is done. I realize that you are probably heading south to find the other keys. I am sorry, but in this I may not help you. I have pressing business in my city in Anórien. My friends are in grave danger there without me, and I must return to take my place as their leader. If you find yourself in Minas Anor — and possibly even Pelargir — and you need help, ask for the Brotherhood of the Hand, and we will do what we can for you. Otherwise, good luck to you in your endeavors, and may fate smile upon you. Good bye." Darion turned and, without a sound, moved off into the shadows.

The boy traveled for another two hours, taking care he was not being followed, and then found a place to camp. Early in the morning, before dawn, he rose up and headed out, but not in the same direction. He turned back, towards where he had come — towards the Mountain of Power, and towards the sorcerer who now owed him a favor. Darion had fulfilled his part of the bargain, and now he wanted his payment. Moving quickly, he made his way stealthily back towards the Haruze encampment at the base of the Mountain. It was there that he hoped he would find what he wanted.

Darion crept towards the back of Zitnrakhil's tent, keeping an eye out for guards. He cut a small hole in the tent through which he entered without detection, moving like a whisper through the shadows. There were three Haruze bodyguards in the front section of the tent, but several curtains hung between him and them. Beyond was

the audience chamber, where he saw the figure of Belphegor (Zimrakhil's brother and lieutenant) seated in meditation, facing Darion with eyes closed.

Darion moved across the floor, silent and intent. Reaching the meditant, the youth placed the tip of one of his knives against Belphegor's neck, just over the jugular. "The blade is poisoned, so I wouldn't move much if I were you. And you better make sure those guards don't do anything stupid. I would hate to get nervous and slip. Now, lets talk about my payment."

He sensed Belphegor's body grow tense with surprise at his peril, as the poisoned blade touched the skin of his neck, ever so gently. After a moment of silence, the sorcerer spoke softly, taking care not to turn his head.

"Your voice is familiar," he said with slow, deliberate caution. "To whom do we owe this pleasure...Master Darion, is it?"

"Ah, it is good to see that you remember me. I hope by now you have discovered that I was successful in fulfilling my part of the bargain. I brought Neithan here and he took up his family's sword. I am not sure that all went exactly as you planned, but that is not of my concern. I did what I was hired to do. Now I am here to make sure that my payment is not forgotten this time. Let's see, if I remember correctly your brother promised me the control of the underworld in both Minas Anor and Pelargir.

"Now, I have thought long and hard about how he might do this, and I have come up with a solution. As you must know, Lórin the king's seer -was left in the mountain in the hands of that beast woman. He is a powerful man, and his special sight would be extraordinarily helpful in finding those that I must defeat to gain control. Therefore, I would call our deal to an end if you could get him to swear to help me in my endeavors, to follow me until Minas Anor and Pelargir are under my control or until three months have passed. He must swear this upon whatever god or Maia he believes in, or there is no deal. And that, my friend, could be bad for us both. Oh, and one last thing. I want his cloak, too. You may speak to your guards if you must, but if there is any sign of treachery, whether sorcerous or otherwise, I will kill you. What do you say?"

"You have done well, young Darion," replied the sorcerer in his politest tone. "I was just speaking with Our Lady of the Mountain when you....interrupted my concentration. You HAVE fulfilled your part of the bargain, and now we shall fulfill ours, as we are able. It is true, as you say, that things have not gone exactly as planned — Neithan has failed Our Lady's hopes—but the visitation of the royal seer (though not an ideal exchange) was certainly a welcome consolation!"

"His fate need not concern you. Our Lady will see to it that you are properly equipped for the achievement of your purpose in Pelargir and Minas Anor. As for Lórin's cloak...that is a matter better discussed in Our Ladyship's presence. Shall we approach her together? You have my word you will not be harmed. Our Lady honors her agreements."

"I will trust you on this matter, Belphegor," said Darion warily. "But believe me, if any treachery occurs, I will focus all of my efforts on killing you before I fall." Darion pulled the blade away from Belphegor's throat, but kept it handy. Looking around the room, the youth picked up two full water skins and strapped them on his shoulder. "I am ready to go. Remember, no tricks."

"I assure you, Darion, you are in safe hands with me." Belphegor called for the guards and ordered them to prepare horses for a ride up the mountainside. It was night outside, and few eyes marked their departure. Belphegor's four bodyguards followed the two of them on horseback until a certain point, after which they dismounted. Belphegor instructed them to wait with the horses until his return, leading Darion on by foot up the stony path to the "holy ground," where the entrance to the caverns lay.

Passing through the entrance, the two began to work their way down into the maze of tunnels and chambers (the path was by now fairly familiar to Darion). But then they descended into the deep caves, where Darion and his companions had encountered the Dark Lady. At the opposite end of the lava tube was an unlit chamber with a smooth floor. Belphegor set his torch in a holder on the wall next to the youth, and instructed him to do the same. "No light may penetrate the domicile of Our Lady. It is her law — not to gaze upon her will also shield you from the holy terror her presence inspires in the living."

"If that's the way it must be," said Darion as he placed the torch in its sconce, while at the same time sliding his dagger stealthily into his hand. With a lighting quick move, the blade was placed into the small of Belphegor's back. "If you think I am walking into there without some type of insurance, you are a fool. When -we leave this mountain, then I will let you go — not a minute sooner. The rules are the same as before, if I feel anything unusual, your a dead man. Now, if you still think it's a good idea, we'll go forward."

"DEATH COMES IN MANY FORMS, YOUNG ONE," said a voice, seemingly from the air all around him. "NOT ALL OF THEM AS SUBTLE OR AS SWIFT AS A KNIFE IN THE DARK!" The voice was that of the Dark Lady that froze his will earlier, but her form -was nowhere to be seen. A chill climbed up the nape of Darion's neck like icy fingers — cold, cruel, inhuman. Darion was in Her presence now. Belphegor spoke. "We tremble before Your Darkness, lady. May I present to you, Master Darion of Minas Anor. Though a mere boy by the reckoning of mortals, he has achieved great deeds on behalf of our cause. The Vase of Dreams he has recovered, and was successful in leading Neith- SPEAK NOT THAT NAME IN MY PRESENCE, SLAVE!!!!! NOT BEFORE MY WRATH HAS COOLED AT HIS ESCAPE....NOW, WHAT WOULD YOU HERE, BOY? AND FOR WHAT CAUSE HAVE YOU RETURNED TO OUR DOMAIN, UNBIDDEN? YOU HAVE RECOVERED THE VASE OF DREAMS FOR US, AND THAT DEED AT LEAST SHALL SPARE YOUR LIFE FOR THE MOMENT. BUT DO NOT DELAY IN YOUR ANSWER, OR OUR CLEM-

ENCY MAY WEAR THIN..."

"My gracious lady, it is true that I nave returned to your home, but not unbidden. It was at the request of your servant Belphegor that I come to you. You see, I made a deal with Zimrakhil, one which I was successful in fulfilling my side of the bargain. I returned to the Mountain hoping to find Zimrakhil, but instead found his brother. He has told me that you would repay me for my work, my lady. If this is not your concern, my lady, then I would apologize for my most rude interruption, and ask your blessing to turn my request back to your servants, Zimrakhil and Belphegor. But if you find it within your exalted station to bother with one as insignificant as myself, I would count it an honor." Darion bowed deeply in respect.

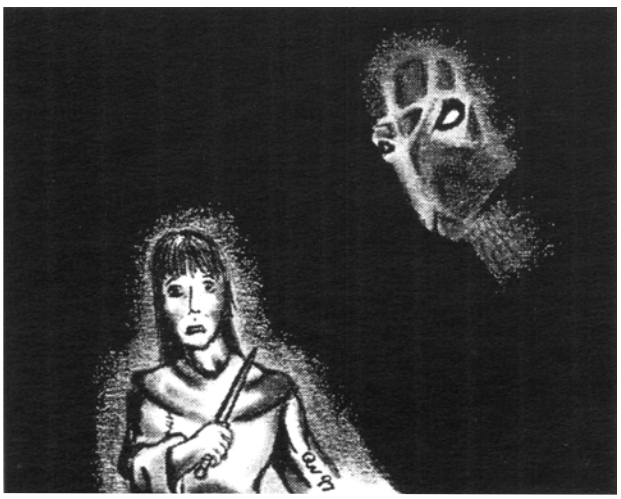
"YOU GROVEL WELL," her voice began to calm down, and grows less menacing, "AND YOUR SERVICES HAVE NOT ESCAPED OUR NOTICE. ALL OF OUR ATTEMPTS AT FINDING A SUITABLE ALLY IN THE REALM OF THE DÚNEDAIN HAVE HITHERTO RESULTED IN FAILURE; YOU ALONE HAVE PROVEN YOUR WORTH IN OUR EYES. WE ARE THEREFORE ENCOURAGED BY YOUR WILLING RETURN TO OUR DOMICILE, AND DESIRE TO ENTER INTO A MORE 'PERMANENT' RELATION OF MUTUAL PROFIT. WHAT, THEN, WOULD YOU HAVE OF US IN RETURN?"

"My gracious Lady, I am honored by your proposition. I think that a mutual alliance would be extremely beneficial to both of us. But you must understand one thing. When I took my first human life, I made a promise, an oath sealed in blood, that I would never serve any master but myself, and that my soul and body would always remain mine. I accept your proposal of alliance, as long as it is understood that that is what it is—an alliance. Surely you understand the importance of a blood oath."

"As for what it is that I -want, well, that is as it always has been. I want the rulership of the underworld of Minas Anor and of Pelargir. I want the Brotherhood of the Hand to stretch its fingers out across the realm, so that every shadow will reek with their presence. I want my name. Arm of the Brotherhood, to be spoken -with awe, reverence, and — most of all — fear. That is my dream. If you could honor my -work for you with anything that -will help me in my endeavors, I will trust your judgment — being far wiser than I — in how that help may be rendered."

"Ah, there is one more thing. To consummate this alliance, I offer you some information. The woman known as Celebriel survived her experience in this glorious mountain. This I am sure you already knew. But she has traveled to Umbar, and has two of the keys. The Cursed One," Darion said with spite, "carries the other. He also is bound for Umbar." Darion bowed deeply. "I hope that this is of service to you, Lady."

"YOU ARE WISE BEYOND YOUR YEARS, YOUNG DARION; AND I FORESEE THAT YOU WILL ACHIEVE YOUR DESIRE IN TIME. FAR GREATER MEN THAN YOU WOULD HAVE SOLD THEIR VERY SOULS TO WIN MY FAVOR; BUT YOU-A MERE URCHIN -ARE UNMOVED BY SUCH PROSPECTS. NO OATH WILL YOU SWEAR TO ME, FOR I HAVE NEED OF NONE – I READ THE TRUTH OF YOUR WORDS IN YOUR HEART. WERE YOUR THOUGHTS NOT WHOLLY BENT TOWARDS THIS END, YOU WOULD NOT BE DARION THE ARM. MOREOVER, OUR NEED NOW IS FOR ALLIES – NOT MINIONS; FOR WAR HAS BEEN KINDLED BY THE DÚNEDAIN AGAINST MY PEOPLE, AND BONDS TOO STRONGLY TIED TO ANY IN GONDOR THREATEN DISCOVERY."



"THIS, THEN, IS MY WILL: THAT WE AND OUR SERVANTS, AND YOU AND YOUR BROTHERHOOD, SHALL HAVE PEACE; THAT THE ONE SHALL NOT HINDER THE OTHER IN THEIR DESIGNS; THAT THE ONE SHALL GIVE AID AND ASSISTANCE TO THE OTHER, WHEN NEED CALLS, AS THEY ARE ABLE. NO OATHS SHALL BE SWORN IN WITNESS TO THESE TERMS-MY PRESENCE IS WITNESS ENOUGH, AND BELPHEGOR KNOWS MY WILL. YET YOUR ALLIANCE WITH US SHALL BE MADE KNOWN BY A MARK THAT CANNOT BE REMOVED, AND THAT CANNOT BE COUNTERFEITED."

Belphegor rolled up his left sleeve, turning the inside of his forearm towards Darion. It bore a strange tattoo or brand of some kind. "NO COMPULSION WILL THIS LAY UPON YOU IN BODY OR SOUL, BUT I SHALL KNOW OF IT IF YOU FAIL TO HONOR OUR ALLIANCE. SINCE THERE IS LITTLE YOU CAN DO TO AID US IN OUR PRESENT SITUATION, IT FALLS TO US TO RENDER ASSISTANCE FIRST TO YOU. WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WISH TO EMBARK TOWARDS YOUR GOAL?"

"This sounds agreeable to me, Lady. As for my plans, they are to return now to Minas Anor, retake my mansion, and gather the Brotherhood together. With the death of the Straight Man, the gangs will be in chaos, so I will move against them, and coerce them under my control. As for what you can do to help me in this, I can see three things that would be of service. The first, and most trivial, is money. This is always needed. The second is contacts, people who can help me in my endeavors. But the third seems to be the one I think most fitting. What I need is a way to strike fear into the hearts of men. As you know, fear is a greater weapon than any blade. And since you, my Lady, are the master at the art of instilling fear, perhaps you could help me in this area. Of course, as always, I bow down before your wisdom. For if there is anything you have in mind, I am sure it will be far more than adequate."

"BELPHEGOR WILL SEE TO YOUR MONETARY NEEDS. AS FOR CONTACTS, THERE WILL BE FEW IN GONDOR, SO LONG AS THE USURPER IS INTENT ON MAKING WAR UPON MY PEOPLE. OUR ALLIANCE SHALL BE MADE KNOWN TO

ANY OF MY SERVANTS THAT PASS THROUGH THE BORDERS OF THE REALM. AS FOR FEAR, THERE IS THE VASE OF DREAMS, BUT YOU WILL REQUIRE INSTRUCTION AND TRAINING IN ITS USE. BELPHEGOR WILL TEACH YOU. ARE THERE ANY OTHER BOONS YOU WOULD BEG OF US?"

"Lady, your gifts have already overwhelmed me in their generosity. Of course, if Belphegor or any of your servants know anything about poisons, I would be very interested in learning that skill as well. If not, I shall look elsewhere. I do have one more question though...Does your organization, or movement, have a name with which I may call it? Other than that, I am ready to consecrate our alliance -with your mark, if you are. I thank you again for your gracious hospitality. May -we both achieve our goals," Darion said -with a bow.

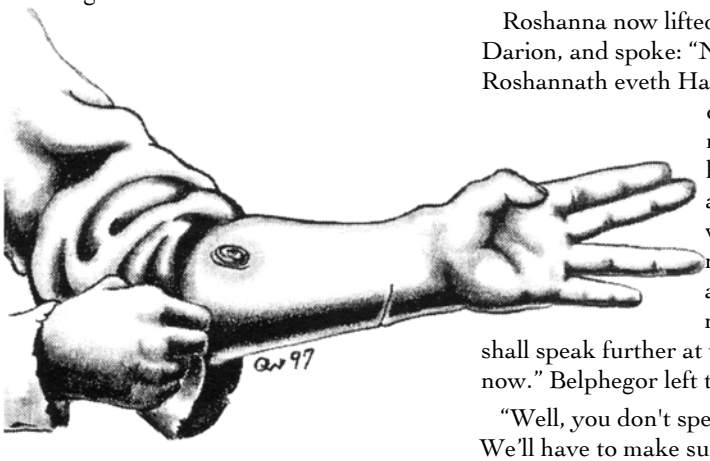
"I AM CALLED THE DARK LADY. THAT IS ALL YOU NEED KNOW. I AM THE DEFENDER OF THE HARUZE, AND THEY WORSHIP ME AS SUCH. ZIMRAKHIL AND BELPHEGOR ARE MY SERVANTS. MY EMISSARIES. FROM THIS MOMENT ONWARD, YOU SHALL TREAT WITH ME ONLY THROUGH THEM, OR THOSE THAT ARE IN THEIR CHARGE. BELPHEGOR WILL ATTEND TO YOUR NEEDS OF THE MOMENT. AND NOW, YOUR RIGHT ARM: EXTEND IT, AND RECEIVE MY SIGN."

With a steely gaze, Darion put forth his right arm. An unseen hand in the darkness beyond clasped his wrist — gently, but irresistibly. It felt like icy death, yet somehow he could tell that its touch was feminine in nature. The hand turned his arm face-up, and now he felt the finger of another hand run the length of his forearm, from the -wrist to the joint. He felt the same terror as when he first encountered the Dark Lady in her wrath, though its power was veiled. But now the finger pressed upon his arm, the ice began to seer his flesh. He would instinctively pull his arm away, but his body had no will to move. The pain grew so great that Darion swooned, and he remember no more...

Darion opened his eyes, awakened by the stinging pain in his arm. He was lying on the floor of a tent. The presence of incense wafted thickly through his nostrils. A young Haruze maiden grasped his wrist gently, applying a healing salve to the burn on his arm. She noticed that he was awake, and smiled curtly.

Looking up, somewhat groggily, the youth spoke to her. "Hello pretty, what's your name? I'm Darion. You wouldn't happen to know how long I was out for, would you?" He looked around to make sure that all was safe, "and where is our friend Belphegor?"

The girl helped support him as he rose from his prone position. Looking down at his arm, Darion discerned a scar-like mark, just below his elbow on the in-ward-facing surface of his right arm. Upon closer scrutiny, he saw that it resembled a fingerprint that has been marked with charcoal. Touching it, he found that the skin around it -was still somewhat tender, but the mark itself produced no sensation when touched, as though it were numb.



The girl whispered something in his ear in Haruze (which he didn't understand a -word of), and then withdrew from his side to the entrance to the tent. Drawing aside the curtain that formed the doorway, she called to another person whom Darion could not see from inside. Then she returned to his side. She moved the healing salves out of the way, and then drew the entrance curtain aside with head bowed low.

Darion heard the heavy footfall of Belphegor's approach, and soon the sorcerer appeared, bowing low in greeting. "May I congratulate you, young Darion, on your wise decision to make alliance with the Our Lady of the Mountain," he said -with his usual pomp and ceremony. "I welcome you with all my heart to the hospitality of our encampment. All of your needs shall be attended, all of your wishes fulfilled, by your command."

"Well met, Belphegor," said Darion. "If you don't mind, it has been a long time since I have eaten, and I would be appreciative if we could dine. Then I would be happy to begin training with you, if that is possible. Although," he added with a glance and a smile toward the young lady, "the view here is very beautiful itself. My heart misses my beautiful city, and I wish to hasten back as soon as possible."

"You anticipate my thoughts, Darion; for a feast of celebration is being prepared in your honor this evening. The Haruze hold those who have been touched by the Mountain-goddess in great veneration. Roshanna here," pointing to the girl, "has herself stood in the presence of Our Lady once, and enjoys the highest praise of her people." Belphegor took her arm and turned its inner side towards Darion, revealing the mark. "She is learned in many arts that may aid your cause. She is yours."

Roshanna now lifted her head, looking at Darion, and spoke: "Nathanah nephesh Roshannath eveth Har-Lugarethur kaved otheka." Belphegor released his grip on her arm, and turned again to Darion. "I -will see to it that the rest of your clothes and belongings are restored to you. We shall speak further at the feast. Farewell for now." Belphegor left the tent with a bow.

"Well, you don't speak Westron, I see. We'll have to make sure that you learn. Obviously, you are a healer. Hmm, and very beautiful. This should be interesting. Roshanna, I am Darion," he said, pointing to himself.

Roshanna sat down on the floor of the tent opposite him, and he saw that she was indeed beautiful — almost perilously so, if she had a mind to be. Her hair and skin were dark, but not as dark as many of the Haruze he had seen. "Perhaps she has some

Dúnadan blood in her," he thought to himself. Her eyes were of blue-green hue (also fairly uncommon for the Haruze). "With a little help, she could physically pass for a Gondorian commoner," he observed, "though her aura and movements betray a high degree of culture and sophistication." In this she reminded Darion almost of the aristocratic Esteliel of Minas Anor, only Roshanna was much younger—closer to his own age.

She repeated his name, "Darion," with a noticeable accent; then, hesitating for a moment, she repeated it again, with almost no accent, and then "I am Roshanna" with equally flawless Anórien street-slur. Darion smiled at her, a bit stunned. "Well it seems you truly are gifted. And for that we are lucky, for if you are to return with me, you must be able to pass as one of us. As it seems, you are already willing to start learning."

After another hour or so, Belphegor returned, drawing aside the flap of the tent-entrance. "I see you two are getting along quite well. But come, the time has come to celebrate." Roshanna helped Darion to his feet and led him out with Belphegor. Outside the tent, he was immediately greeted by cheers and roars of approval from a surrounding throng of Haruze.

The three proceeded amid the crowd, which opened up before them to make a way, to a large open-air tent, big enough to seat several hundreds, and laden with aromatic and sumptuous foods. Musicians begin to play, and the celebration began, as Belphegor led Darion to the seat of honor. Once seated, Belphegor raised his arms, and a hushed silence follo-wed. "Display your arm to them, Darion, that they may see the favor that Our Lady has bestowed upon you."

Rising from his chair, the boy-like figure of Darion gazed out across the crowd. Pulling up his sleeve, but keeping his arm turned towards himself, Darion looked for a moment at the mark upon his arm. A mark that would always remind him of the true beginning of his dominion. With a look out at the crowd, Darion, in one quick motion, thrust his fist into the air, showing the mark upon his arm to those in front of him. A triumphant roar of approval shattered the hushed silence as the mark was revealed. Never before had he been the object of such veneration, the center of such attention. It was a moment that would never be forgotten. Belphegor allowed the applause to continue for several minutes, until finally he raised his arms to command silence once again. Then he clasped his hand in Darion's, rolling his sleeve back down. "From this moment on, Darion, no man who fears the Name of the Mountain of Power shall do you harm, nor you they. We are bound together like brothers, and none shall stand against us." Then, turning to the crowd, he yelled: "Ni'kelah!" and, after one final cheer, everyone embark upon the revelry of the night's feasting.

Darion sat cross-legged on a luxuriant Haruze rug, with Belphegor to his right and Roshanna to his left, and before him was set more food than he had ever seen in his life. Roshanna took his hand, gesturing to the food "Darion, ha-oleka eth-lehem?" Belphegor translated with a grin "She wants to know if you like the food."

"The food? It's wonderful," said Darion, being careful to watch how the others ate so as not to let his beggar upbringing offend anyone. Turning to Belphegor, he said "So, my friend Belphegor, how did your peace talks with the Gondorians go? And where is your brother? I had hoped to see him now that we are on a little more comfortable terms."

"The parley? Mmmm...we talked, Elendin and I. The king is convinced that my brother and I have been plotting an insurrection against him from the start, which means that SOMEONE very influential has been telling him these lies. But a man like Castamir is capable of turning a lie into truth, such is the curse of all usurpers—they fear always for their own safety, secretly remorseful for the violence that brought them to power. At any rate, we cannot but defend ourselves now; the Haruze garrisons of the Anduin-vale — Minas Anor and Minas Ithil—have been wrongfully discharged and sent off on a death march, and who knows what mischief Castamir's done in Umbar to mar our peace?

"In a situation such as this we'd be fools to withdraw from the Mountain. If it should fall, all ways into Haradwaith will be laid bare to his marauding armies. And so we are FORCED to prepare for war. Who can say what the outcome will be? A house divided cannot stand, and Castamir's house is divided; the only question is whether we can hold out until one of his own family slits his throat." Belphegor sliced into the juicy meat before him with a steak knife as he talked. "As for my illustrious brother, he has withdrawn east, to muster the Haruze Confederacy at Amrûn, while I hold the fort here."

"Hmm," mused Darion, "I hope this does not disturb you too much, but I believe the influential one who turned Castamir against you is sitting inside your mountain. It was the royal seer that convinced Castamir to move against you. Perhaps you could use him to your advantage in this situation. If there were a way to turn him to your side," he continued as he held out a particularly tasty pastry towards Roshanna, "he might prove a valuable ally."

"Alas, that would be very difficult, knowing his connection with certain powers. If I knew of a weak spot that could be exploited I would let you know. But I do not know much about him." Darion sat back and thought for a moment. Is it to bring down Castamir that you move to control Neithan? I would say that he is a dangerous piece in this game, a wild card, if you take my meaning. I would be wary of him."

Belphegor s bearded face became grave and his voice more serious. "Yes, I know about the seer. Our Lady has been searching his mind while you've been asleep. But as for his fate, it shall be for her to decide. Even so, it was a blunder on his part. So consumed with anger and suspicion towards Neithan was he, that he misread our intentions at every turn, and so has skewed the king's mind ....irrevocably, I fear."

"As for Neithan, his destiny is great, prophesied from centuries past, that he should liberate his people from the hands of a tyrant. If only he would have accepted his destiny, and had not been swayed by the misguided visions of that seer, all of us — Gondor and the Haruze—would now be rid of Castamir. Alas, for we found Neithan too late. His reasoning has been distorted by the seer, and by that sorceress Iriel. We've failed...."

A tear rolled down the huge man's face. For a brief moment, his facade of strength and purpose crumbled, revealing a man heartbroken at an almost religious devotion, freely offered, that has been spurned. It was a sight that stirred pity in Darion s heart. But then his host recovered his composure, holding his head high and his semblance proud. "But no; we shall not be conquered by despair. The power of the Lady goes with us, and with her strength behind us, we shall defend our people unto death, so that all Gondor shall know that we, at least, are free, and will never submit to tyranny."

At this Darion fell silent. Roshanna took his hand. "Darion, yesh laylah;

namnu ad boker." Belphegor translated. "The hour grows late; and you are still recovering from the touch of Our Lady. You should rest now. On the morrow, you and I shall discuss what preparations are to be made for your return to Minas Anor...in power. Goodnight." Belphegor rose to his feet and bowed respectfully, and then turned towards his tent.

Darion suddenly became aware of how tired he actually was. He let Roshanna lead him back to his tent, all the while wondering if what Belphegor said was true. If it was, then perhaps his actions with Neithan were misguided. Perhaps he should be have been led to the throne. Well, as of now, that was of no consequence. He cleared his mind of the thought.

Roshanna accompanied him to his tent, and when they arrived, he found that two reed mats — each with a pillow and coverings — had been laid out beside one another. "Darion," Roshanna said (a bit awkwardly), "we sleep here." Looking down at the mats, so close together, Darion turned a bright red. He quickly lay down and covered himself up, facing away from the other mat. "Good night, Roshanna," he said, with a quiver in his voice.

An uncomfortable silence followed as he hid under the covers. He felt her eyes watching him. After what seem an eternity, Darion heard Roshanna's light footsteps moving away towards the entrance to the tent—the curtain was pulled over the door, the candle was blown out, his arm moved instinctively for his dagger. "Can she be trusted?!?" his streetwise conscience assailed him urgently. He felt his heart racing as he tried to remain absolutely still and quiet, listening for any hint of threat or betrayal. He imagined that she could hear even his heartbeat!

Her footsteps drew near to him in the darkness, and then....he heard her slide under the covers of her own mattress next to his, then silence. For a long while he remained tense, dagger clenched in his hand, sweat beading upon his forehead. At last, as the pounding of his own temples abated, he heard Roshanna's soft, rhythmic breathing. She slept.

Suddenly it occurred to Darion that his behavior might be seen as a sign of weakness, a way to get at him. If this woman were to be his, then she would expect certain things from him. He must make her feel that he was strong; she -must not doubt him. And what if he had insulted her? He needed to be certain of her trust.

Quietly, Darion looked out from under the blankets and gazed at the beautiful form of Roshanna lying next to him. "Roshanna," he said quietly, as his hands moved out from under his blankets towards hers. She stirred from sleep — there -was perhaps a shadow of uncertainty in her touch. In a moment that uncertainty passed and, without words, Roshanna drew herself close, sliding her arms about him, pressing her soft, warm body up against his.

Darion had never been this close to anyone before — much less any woman. For as long as he could remember, he had been alone — cold and alone in the loveless alleys of Minas Anor. Her lips pressed against his. He would be alone no longer.

Just before drifting off into a blissful sleep, Darion pondered how all this came to be. How strange it seemed to him that he would feel so safe in a camp surrounded by those whom, up until very recently, he had regarded as his enemies. But it was true. He was at peace. This one evening he would sleep without his tensed senses waiting to alert him to any danger. He would sleep without one eye open, his guards down. As he drifted off to sleep, he realized how nice it would be to live like everyone

else, living his life in safety and security, with a family to come home to.

NO! Darion's eyes blazed open. "Do not fool yourself," his mind screamed, "Your lot is NOT to be like others. Your destiny is to rule that which you have know so well. Minas Anor will be yours, followed by other cities." His body began to tense up. "Nothing — no man, child, animal, beast, god, or even woman —will come between me and my destiny. She is mine, to command and use. I will not allow this physical pleasure to stop me. I am a child of the, streets, born and bred, and I must not forget the lessons that they taught me. Ever vigilant, eternally aware, and COLD. The streets are cold just as life is cold. I too must be cold."

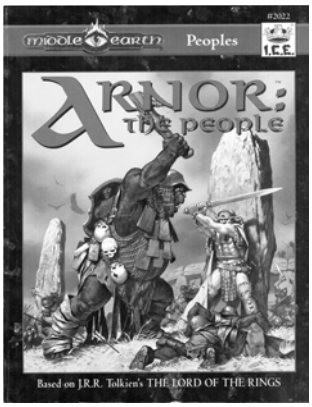
Darion once again began to fall asleep, tense, with one hand near a weapon. It was strange, but in that dreamy place between wakefulness and sleep, Darion thought he caught a glimpse of the Lady Mórdulin, looking down on him with sadness in her eyes, and what might even have been thought to be pity. Then there was only blackness.

Product Review

Wesley J. Frank

Arnor: The People

(#2022) Charlottesville, Virginia
Iron Crown Enterprises, 1996



With the Arnor: The People, ICE have shown their determination to follow through with the new-concept of the Middle-earth product line. The quality of the work is certainly not in question, since this is the third printing for much of the material presented. Being an area that holds one of the most important places in the Middle-earth's history, Arnor certainly deserves to be the most revised ICE product. From the many separate supplements that comprised the first edition, the material on Arnor was pulled together in the immense venture that was the Arnor realm volume, much more coherent and structured than its predecessors. Now, in Arnor: The People, it has gained an additional quality, since the structure of this work surpasses that of the volumes from the realms series, which contained information on things as diverse as flora and fauna, geography, history and sociopolitical situation. This volume is centered on the information necessary for leading a well founded campaign in Arnor, and its 194 pages (with 31 pages of tables and a helpful index of important personages) contain practically all of the information needed to create a detailed series of campaigns in the realms of Eriador.

The volume starts with an overview of the lands of Eriador and the kingdoms of Arthedain, Cardolan and Rhudaur, then describes the historical events essential for the development of the region and its future kingdoms. The migrations of the diverse peoples that occupied the region are described in all the three ages, and they are depicted in maps that clearly show the movements of the various nations and the areas they have finally settled. In the end, all of the information is summed up in the Eriadorian timeline.

In the chapters that follow, all of the creatures that inhabited Eriador and its kingdoms in the aftermath of the Great Plague (T.A. 1643) are described in detail, especially the various human cultures. A table presents the social relations of the many inhabitants of Eriador. Political, social and economical aspects of all of the three kingdoms are explained, and in addition to the prices for the goods and services, another chart describes the looks and denominations for all of the currencies that can be found in Eriador. Institutions and societies of the three kingdoms and the festivals that provide for most of the social life bring to life the Dúnadan realms, while the description of the military forces and ranking completes the picture of the sister kingdoms. The description of the royal courts offer lots of possibilities for scenarios concerning the intrigue and conspiracy, and the political events in the realm constitute definitely the most interesting and thought provoking piece of material in this volume. The figures of note described in this module are all very well presented, and each one of them given a unique personality, as well as a special section devoted solely to the description of family and connections. The various characters are given first for the selected year of T.A. 1643, and they are separated according to their importance and realm of origin. Some of the most important figures from the other times have also been given some space (figures from the Second Age, T.A. 1409, T.A. 1974 and T.A. 3018). Items of power that belong to the most important leaders are described in detail in a separate chapter.

The Rangers of the North are given the deserved space at the end of the book, and their schooling, lifestyle and duties are described in depth. Guidelines are given for the creation of a ranger character, while separate tables give a list of missions that the Rangers usually take care of and the dangers they have to face.

Appendices set the genealogy of Dunadan kings of Arnor and the three sister kingdoms that followed it along side the southern line of Gondor, as well as the definitions of some key concepts for the understanding of Middle-earth. Beside the bare statistics for the members of the military forces of Arthedain, Cardolan, Rhudaur, Lindon, Imladris, the Dwarves, the Lossoth and Angmar, the tables contain more details on their uniforms, armaments and military organization. A mid-Second Age Númenórean diplomatic party, the Rangers of the North and the Hobbits of the Shire are also presented in the tables.

No major criticism can be given to any of the written material from this volume, since the revision author Wesley J. Frank has evidently done a splendid job to integrate all of the information into a well structured whole. Still, some minor defects catch the eye. Some of the illustrations depict Dúnedain with beards, while the fifth king of Cardolan bears an uncanny resemblance to the Orc he is fighting on one of the drawings. The portraits of the important Dúnedain are also poorly executed, and most of them have similar features, even though the characters they are depicting are not closely related. These portraits should help the gamemaster introduce players to the appearance of the important characters they could meet during the game, so they should be executed with more care and respect for the facts presented in the text.

This volume has proved that the newest edition of Arnor as two separate books, The People and The Land, has been another wise choice for the ICE.

With Arnor: The People, hey have created another volume of great quality, adding to the respect that the 2nd edition MERP product line has already earned in the public. The region of Arnor, which holds such an important place in Tolkien's works, had been given another adequate presentation in a MERP book, thanks to the devoted work of the revision author Wesley J. Frank and the other associates who contributed the materials printed in this excellent volume.

Reviewer: Jasna Martinovic

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